

LOVE IN THE 21ST STATE

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My dispute with Abraham Lincoln began in April, 1834.

I was a candidate to become the third sheriff in the history of Sangamon County. The second sheriff, General James D. Henry, hero of the Winnebago War and Black Hawk War, had died of a lung disease at the age of 37. My opponent, David Dickinson, was the deputy sheriff under Henry. Lincoln supported Dickinson.

Had your debts been as deep as Lincoln's, you would have supported Dickinson as well. Lincoln's general store had failed, yet he had borrowed heavily to sustain it. He owed nearly \$500 to Peter Van Bergen and Reuben Radford, \$100 to Eli Blankenship, \$60 to William Watkins, and there were others—you can find them in the county records. Lincoln's creditors were losing patience not only with Lincoln, but also with Henry and Dickinson, who had befriended Lincoln and were loath to seize his possessions.

I announced my candidacy at the courthouse in Springfield, shortly after Henry's memorial service. At first, I feared the timing of my announcement—I had hoped to wait until old Henry was in the ground a few days—but my cousin, Assemblyman William F. Elkin, who was now running for the state senate, persuaded me to take advantage of the gathered masses.

As it turned out, William and I were hardly the only bereft candidates in attendance. Lincoln, running for assembly as an upstart Whig, was present, as were the dozen others competing for the four open seats. A young reporter from the *Sangamon Journal* noted our names and neglected to check his spellings. The record shows he stole a "t" from my first name and appended an "s" to my surname, rendering me Dr. Garret Elkins.

The reporter asked: "You are a doctor—why do you want to be sheriff and what qualifies you for the position?"

With William's help, I had prepared for this predictable question. With William by my side, I replied: "The first sheriff, John Taylor, was a dear friend. At an auction he supervised, I bought eleven of Springfield's first available lots—and I did not need a loan to buy them. The second sheriff, Mr. Henry, whom we are all honoring today, was also a friend. I fought with him in the Black Hawk War. Together, we routed the Sauk and the Fox tribes at the Battle

of Bad Axe. So I am familiar not only with the job, but with the strong men who have held it. I have seen what goes awry when the sheriff is lenient. With respect to Mr. Henry's memory, I will be more diligent about bringing debtors to account and preventing them from fleeing the county. I am running for sheriff for that precise reason. The widespread, irresponsible borrowing must stop. It is an affront to Sangamon's early settlers, who seldom bought what they could not afford. It is true that I am the doctor to countless families in Springfield, all of whom can attest to my fairness and integrity. But more than that, I am a longtime resident who cares deeply about county affairs and finances."

Lincoln and Dickinson approached near the end of my speech. Dickinson dressed in black suit and tie. Lincoln, who was twenty-five, wore a dusty, bob-tailed sack coat, and his trousers were cuffed three inches above his shoes. Incredibly, his socks were white—no easy task in muddy Springfield. The father in me wished to reprimand him—to advise him—about his appearance. His was not a candidate's wardrobe. But I had only met him twice before. Moreover, he endorsed my opponent; it was in my best interest to check the paternal instinct to help him.

Dickinson and I shook hands. I proposed one debate in Springfield and another in New Salem. Before Dickinson could reply, Lincoln, with his hand on Dickinson's shoulder, said: "Sheriff Henry will be tough to replace. I wish I could vote for you, Doctor Elkin. But then I would go bankrupt." Now he put his hand on William's shoulder. "And Assemblyman Elkin—how is your race for senate proceeding?"

"Expensively, but all's well that ends well," said William. "And how about your own candidacy?"

"Well in New Salem, ill elsewhere," said Lincoln. He was mocking my medical background with his word selection, I was certain. I cleared my throat. "I suppose deputy surveyors like you, Lincoln, are more qualified for public office," I said.

Lincoln grinned. His teeth were as white as his socks; evidently he did not chew tobacco. He gazed into the street and gestured with his gray eyes and dark bushy brows that we ought to gaze there as well. Two young women wearing plumed white hats were crossing. They lifted their long dresses to avoid the muck. This was, I remind you, 1834, so the roads of Springfield were unpaved. It was still a frontier town. It was not yet the state capital; back then, the capital was Vandalia, seventy miles to the south. In Springfield, the stench

of manure, piled high on street corners, was everywhere. Pigs roamed freely. There were no sidewalks.

When one of the women slipped—and the other, in attempting to help her up, also fell in the mud—Lincoln burst with laughter. Dickinson, William, and I looked down at our shoes. We looked up when Lincoln yelled, “Cole! Uncle!” and greeted two men walking over to join our group. “Here come two of New Salem’s finest,” added Lincoln. He introduced us to a broad-shouldered man named Coleman Smoot and a stocky man named Uncle Jimmy Short.

“You gentlemen were acquainted with General Henry?” asked William.

“No, but Lincoln needed a ride to Springfield,” said Smoot.

Again, Lincoln directed our attention to the women in the road. One had stood up. The other remained seated in the mud, the plumed hat still on her head. “Reminds me of a duck,” said Lincoln.

“How is that?” asked Dickinson.

“Feathers on her head and down on her behind,” said Lincoln. This time, we all laughed. But at once, Lincoln grew serious. He ran his fingers through his thick black hair and covered his eyes with the same hand—as if to block his vision of the women, or of everything. “Permit me to excuse myself,” he

said. "I see two Whigs in the distance." He walked toward the courthouse, Dickinson following.

"Are all young men from New Salem so abrupt?" I asked.

"He is nervous about his election," said Smoot. "And he is worried—" he added, but then he stopped. He looked at Uncle Jimmy.

"Lincoln is in love," said Uncle Jimmy. His voice was high and squeaky. "And the young woman is still considering his proposal. But her previous suitor was quite wealthy."

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Though confident about my campaign in Springfield, I needed a boost in New Salem, which was Lincoln's hometown. So William and I canvassed in New Salem. At noon, I spoke to a crowd of about fifty men gathered on Main Street, with William by my side. I gestured toward the lot where Lincoln's general store once stood. "This lot—formerly home to the Berry & Lincoln store—was once valued at one hundred dollars. But it recently went at auction for only ten," I proclaimed. "How can lenders be expected to finance a revival of New Salem, when their loans are treated as gifts because of lenient law enforcement?"

I expected nods and cheers in response to my rhetorical question. Instead I heard whispers. Heads were turning. Lincoln was hobnobbing with the crowd, shaking hands. Uncle Jimmy was with him. Lincoln doffed his hat and, from inside it, withdrew several letters. “A fine time and place to perform your duties as postmaster,” I said.

“Doctor Elkin,” he calmly stated, “I am tempted to insult your intelligence.”

I was baffled. How to rejoin, without walking into his trap? “Ask about Dickinson,” whispered William.

“I thought I was running against David Dickinson,” I said, perhaps too hotly.

“The deputy sheriff is campaigning in Springfield today,” said Lincoln. “I am only here to borrow your stethoscope.” Everyone in the crowd laughed loudly, with what seemed to me like a collective, almost unanimous laugh; the immediacy of his joke reached them where the facts of my speech could not travel.

Perspiration beaded on my forehead. I feared that I would win not a single vote in New Salem. “I don’t belong here,” I mumbled to William.

My cousin stepped in front of me. “Lincoln, you have a bright future in politics, but you have failed as a businessman,” he said. “By all accounts, you should have neither a horse to ride on nor a compass to survey with. All your property belongs, by rights, to Sangamon. Yet instead of repaying your debts, you keep plunging. When does it end? Never, if Dickinson gets elected. Now, you are not Sangamon’s only debtor. I could mention your friend Bill Greene, who is just as arrears as you are. But Garrett Elkin is not running against you. He is running only on a simple premise: that the sheriff should enforce the law. Do you disagree with that premise?”

There was a light rain of applause. Lincoln donned his hat. With his long legs he strode toward us. He faced the crowd, from whose viewpoint William and I, now standing alongside a capped Lincoln, must have seemed unduly short. Both my cousin and I were six feet tall, yet in Lincoln’s presence we likely appeared as two bishops flanking the towering king on a chessboard.

“I disagree,” Lincoln said, “with Doctor Elkin’s connection between unpaid debts and New Salem’s problems. New Salem needs roads to transport its produce. The Sangamon River needs a canal to accommodate steamboats—otherwise everyone will continue moving to Petersburg and Sand Ridge. That

is why property values are dropping. It has nothing to do with the sheriff's duties. And that is why I am tempted to insult Doctor Elkin's intelligence."

Lincoln faced William and me. Then he turned back to the crowd. "Now, a word on my dues," he said. "I will repay them all with interest. I will not leave New Salem, like others have." With that, he walked to the main road, in the direction of his old store. Bill Greene, whom William had mentioned, awaited him with two chestnut horses of medium height, bridled and saddled.

When the crowd dispersed, Uncle Jimmy approached. "That young man will repay his debts," he said, in his squeaky voice.

"Is he still worried about the girl?" I asked.

"Yes," said Uncle Jimmy. "She told him she needs more time to decide."

§

During our ride back to Springfield, William asked me: "Do you still think of Rhoda?" This was a young woman to whom I had been engaged as a young man, back when the Elkins all lived in Ohio. When our branch of the family moved to Springfield, Rhoda declined to join us, ending our engagement. And I had previously confided to William—and only William—that I thought of Rhoda both on my wedding day to Harriet and also when my two sons were born.

“Garry, I asked you a question,” said William.

“Not a day goes by when I do not think of Rhoda,” I said. “She was—sightly. And she would have made a loving wife and mother.”

§

I became the third sheriff in the history of Sangamon County. To my amazement, and surely owing to William’s skill, I prevailed even in the New Salem precinct: I received 84 votes to Dickinson’s 77. (My, how small were our populations in those days.) William, for his part, won election to the state senate, and Lincoln was elected to the Ninth General Assembly.

But I was unable to seize Lincoln’s property as quickly as I had hoped. The surveyor, Jack Calhoun—Lincoln’s employer and one of Springfield’s leading citizens—implored me to wait. Settlers were flocking into unexplored regions of Sangamon and the surrounding counties. Lincoln himself was responsible for laying out lots in Petersburg, New Boston, Bath, and Huron. Lincoln also located a road from the Sangamon River to Jacksonville. Had I seized Lincoln’s horse and compass, I would have impeded the development of the region. Lincoln was not due to complete his surveys until November. After which time, Calhoun said, he would support my levy of Lincoln’s equipment.

When November arrived, and Lincoln remained arrears despite his forthcoming salary as an assemblyman, I hastened to New Salem. I found Lincoln sitting and reading on the porch at the Hill-McNeil store on Main Street. This was where he kept his post office. His legs were stretched and his feet rested upon the rail. He was reading a thick volume entitled *Commentaries on the Laws of England*. He leaned back, wobbling his chair on its hind legs. Again, he brought out the father in me. I had an urge to say: "Careful, young man. You might fall." But my writ was in my pocket and my deputies were behind me. "You know why I am here," I said.

He wobbled forward. The front legs of the chair landed delicately, almost soundlessly, on the wood of the porch. Without a glance in my direction he stood, turned around, and entered the store. He came out with saddle, bridle, and compass. "My horse is in the back," he said. "I will give you my *Commentaries* too, though I doubt they will fetch much at auction."

"Farewell," I said, handing the equipment to my deputies.

Our carriage was ready to depart when Lincoln came running from the store with a red apple in his hand. He fed it to the chestnut horse we had seized. One of my deputies had already mounted this horse. "There are plenty of apples in Springfield," I said, annoyed at Lincoln's display.

“I have one question for you, Sheriff,” he said, stroking the horse as it chewed. “How is William traveling to Vandalia?”

Oh, how close I was to departing that instant—to saying goodbye to Lincoln and New Salem forever. Yet he had cooperated, and I could not, with all my deputies watching, react coldly. “The carriage leaves from Springfield in ten days,” I told him. “That is how William is traveling.”

“Well, good day, Sheriff,” said Lincoln. “Thank you for not taking my book.”

Just then I wished to ask about his girl. Were they engaged, now that he was an elected assemblyman?

Instead, I nodded to the deputy who was driving. The carriage began to roll away. Lincoln’s horse trotted alongside it, my deputy holding the reins.

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At the courthouse in Springfield, the county auctioned Lincoln’s possessions. Uncle Jimmy and Coleman Smoot were in attendance. The judge, a mustached man named Samuel Lockwood, banged his gavel. But before Lockwood could begin the proceedings, Uncle Jimmy spoke. “I will buy Lincoln’s entire lot, excluding the horse, for eighty dollars,” he said.

“Nonsense,” said Smoot. “I will bid one hundred for Lincoln’s lot.”

“One hundred and twenty,” countered Uncle Jimmy. Both men were giggling.

The rest of the men who had come to bid—and it was the same five farmers who came to every auction—exchanged astonished glances. Lockwood banged his gavel again. “Sold,” he groaned. “Next—does anyone have a bid for the horse?”

Smoot stepped forward. “Your honor, if it pleases you, we brought with us another horse, younger and stronger than the one Sheriff Elkin seized,” he said, nodding in my direction. “Lincoln is fond of his own horse, so we wanted to retrieve it for him. We wish to substitute one horse for another.”

“Sheriff, do you know these lunatics from New Salem?” Lockwood asked me. I nodded.

“Sheriff Elkin will determine if this second horse is of equal or greater value,” said Lockwood. “Court is adjourned.” He banged his gavel.

Outside the courthouse, I stood with Smoot and Uncle Jimmy. We compared the two chestnut horses. Each was approximately sixteen hands tall. Side by side, they looked especially familiar. “Is this Bill Greene’s horse?” I asked.

The men looked at each other. “How did you know?” asked Smoot.

“Strange, what details we remember,” I said.

“Truth is, I don’t know which one is younger or stronger,” said Smoot. “But they should have similar values at auction. And if that is the case, what is the harm in exchanging one for another?”

I wanted to hold my ground. I wanted to punish Lincoln. I still believed I had to teach the young man about financial responsibility. And yet, here were two men who had spent their own money in Lincoln’s service. And a third, in Greene, who had given up a horse for him. Let me add that I had seized and auctioned the possessions of dozens of men in 1834, but this was the only occasion on which friends—not parents, not siblings, not cousins—had intervened. And they had traveled from New Salem to do it.

“You may return the horse to Lincoln,” I said.

I shook hands with Smoot, then with Uncle Jimmy. It was the last time I saw either of them.

§

I saw Lincoln one more time before he and William departed for the legislative session in Vandalia.

Harriet and I and our sons had come to First Presbyterian Church for Sunday services. On this particular Sunday, we found Lincoln sitting in our pew.

William, his wife Betsey, and their five children were milling about. On Lincoln's lap rested a prayer book, but in his hands he held his *Commentaries*. His hair was combed, and he was splendidly dressed. At first, I guessed he had borrowed Dickinson's black suit, but that suit would have been too short and too wide. This one fit exquisitely. The cuffs fell just below his wrists and ankles. The shirt was as white as his teeth. It was as if he had bought it moments before sitting. "Is that *Corinthians* you're perusing?" I asked him.

He grinned. Now we were old friends, though I had taken his horse and compass not one week earlier. I introduced Harriet and my children. As soon as Harriet curtsayed and left to find Betsey and William, Lincoln said: "How nice it must be—a wife and children."

"Yes—and when will I hear of your engagement?" I asked. The question tumbled from my mouth. I immediately regretted my lack of tact. Surely Lincoln surmised that I had gossiped about his personal affairs.

"That is not one of the first questions I thought you would ask," he replied.

"I do not know the girl's name," I said, ignoring his solicitous hint at an affront.

"Thank you for your thoughts," he said.

“Forgive my intrusion,” I said, sitting beside him. “I have been a father for ten years. It is sometimes hard for me not to be a father, even to grown men.”

“I know you mean well,” he said, shifting in his seat to face me.

“I am also curious about your suit,” I offered.

“Uncle Jimmy lent me the money,” he said. “In exchange, I have agreed to abide his gossip about my personal affairs.” For the first time, he put his hand on my shoulder.

The pastor, a pale man with prominent cheekbones named John Bergen, approached the pulpit. The crowd quieted. Congregants returned to their seats. William now sat on Lincoln’s other side. “Well, look who’s here,” said William.

Bergen glared in our direction. Then he began, in his deep, scratchy voice: “Some of you may go to heaven. Some of you may go to hell.”

“I’m going to Vandalia,” Lincoln whispered.

§

Lincoln moved to Springfield in 1837, a few years before it became the capital. We sometimes crossed paths in court, for he had mastered those *Commentaries* and joined a law practice. On one of those occasions, I could not help myself, and once more asked him what became of the girl he had hoped

to engage. “She died,” he said, looking away. “It was a few summers ago, now. Typhoid.”

I said I was sorry. He nodded, and he quickly shifted the subject to impending bank legislation.

In future years, it was William who befriended Lincoln, especially after William became a Whig. Together, they were part of the famous Whig delegation in Illinois nicknamed “The Long Nine.” They earned that name because all of them were so tall—in marked contrast to the reigning Democrat, Stephen Douglas, who was the so-called Little Giant.

Much later, when Lincoln became president, he appointed William to be the Register of the United States Land Office at Springfield. And when Lincoln ultimately came to rest in Springfield, in 1865, William was one of his pallbearers. After the funeral, I waited for a chance to talk to William alone. As soon as Harriet and Betsey were away from us, I said to William: “He was married to Mary Todd for more than twenty years. But do you believe—in his final hours—he thought of his early love?”

“You would not ask if you did not suspect the answer,” said William.

It is strange—all these years later, I still do not know the name of Lincoln’s girl. I suppose it does not matter. She is probably not important to historians

or professors. But she will forever color *my* impressions of the late president.

Might I be the only one who feels this way?

Ilan Mochari's Pushcart-nominated debut novel, *Zinsky the Obscure* (Fomite, 2013), earned acclaim from Publishers Weekly, Kirkus, and Booklist. His short stories, poems, and essays have been widely published, appearing or forthcoming in *McSweeney's*, *Hobart*, *J Journal*, *Valparaiso Fiction Review*, *Slate*, and elsewhere.