

Mr. Leavitt: Work's a Gift, and There's a Giver

Dain A. Trafton

“Why do you stay up there?” That was the question that sooner or later my mother would ask when Mr. Leavitt ate dinner with us on Sunday after church. “Up there” meant the old farm on Pleasant Ridge, where he'd been born and where, she suspected, he intended to die. She worried about him, what with his being in his eighties and all alone, a widower, with no phone, and three miles from us, who were his nearest neighbors. All his children had left and rarely came back—not even Lucille, his daughter only seven miles away in Lewiston, who had a good job in the mill.

“You ought to go live with Lucille,” my mother would say.

At which Mr. Leavitt always bristled, “And look out the danged window all day at people going up and down? No sir, I wouldn't like it with no farm to work.”

“Work's not the only thing in life.”

“Never said it was. I like to sing too. We're supposed to work. That's in the Bible..”

Then my father would change the subject to politics, which was safer, and it wouldn't be long before Mr. Leavitt announced he had to get home for chores. He'd hum as he harnessed Sam, his little star-faced Morgan, and as he turned into the road he'd start to sing. Maybe it would be “Mademoiselle from Armentieres” or some other “risky” song from his days in France during the first war—“some work and some singing over there,” he used to say—but usually it was a hymn, punctuated now and then by admonitions addressed to Sam:

“Rejoice, ye pure in heart;
Rejoice, give thanks and sing;
Your festal banner wave on high,
Hi, Sam, hi! Get your teeth off of them weeds!
The cross of Christ your King.
Rejoice, rejoice, rejoice, give thanks and sing. Hi, you Sam! Hi!”

I used to stand on tiptoe to try to follow the sound all the way to Pleasant Ridge, which, of course, was impossible.

It was a hard life he had up there, tending to sixty acres of rocky gardens, steep fields and

steeper pastures, a wood lot half a mile from the house, a house that always needed fixing in some part of it, a cow that tended to stray and had to be milked morning and evening, a flock of hens that sometimes laid where you could find the eggs and sometimes didn't, a fierce old sow past bearing that Mr. Leavitt somehow never got around to slaughtering, and Sam, who had such an inclination to set his teeth on things that the boards of his crib needed replacing twice a year. But Mr. Leavitt didn't mind; a hard life suited him.

“In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread,” he used to say as though it were music to his ears.

When I went up to help him, the sound of his ax or his hammer or his singing—especially his singing—led me to him. “Jesus, the very thought of thee / With sweetness fills my breast,” I heard one day, and discovered him washing out the sow's trough while she watched balefully. He had a pitchfork to wave her off in case she got “ideas.” If I heard “ROCK of AGE-es, CLEFT for ME, / LET me HIDE mySELF in THEE” and heard a thump or a crack at every stressed syllable, I knew he was splitting wood, happy as a man can be.

The last time I saw him was at dinner the Sunday before I left for college on Monday. His health hadn't been good that summer, but he seemed as full of spirit as ever, especially when my mother brought up the subject of “that danged place,” Lewiston, where he might move in with Lucille. In spite of that, I had a feeling I'd never see him again at that table or on Pleasant Ridge, and maybe he felt it too. He kept asking me why I wanted to leave the farm, and shook his head skeptically at all my explanations until I too began to think they sounded lame.

“There's good work to be done right here,” he repeated, which I couldn't deny, and neither my mother nor my father helped me much. “Work's a gift, and there's a giver,” he said, which was true too.

At last he left, which was almost a relief, and as he turned into the road, he began as usual to sing. “O God, our help in ages past,” he sang, “Our hope for years to come.” Which seemed truer than anything else. “Our shelter from the stormy blast, And our eternal home.” Then for the last time I stood on tiptoe to listen to him all the way to Pleasant Ridge if I could, which, of course, I couldn't. Not that day anymore than all the earlier days, when it hadn't seemed as important.

He died in December. My father found him in the barn under the pitchfork and a load of hay that he'd been carrying to Sam. Snow had come in the open door and made a drift against the hay like the drifts that built against everything in the snow's way all across the old farm and everywhere on Pleasant Ridge. But I knew he didn't care. He was in another home, singing praises, I was sure, and working too, maybe, though I thought the professors of religion at college might not agree.

“Work's a gift, and there's a giver.” I can hear him say it now as clear as ever I heard it.