

Until We Meet Again

Dain A. Trafton

My grandfather on my mother's side was a pious man, though you had to know him well to see it. He was a Maine farmer who didn't have much to say about God, and normally wouldn't have liked to have the subject brought up. He went to church pretty regularly, but I never heard him discuss the sermon afterwards. Surely he was no candidate to be a deacon. Still, if by piety we mean what the dictionary says--not just talking about God and going to church, but an attitude towards life in which home, family, tradition, and God are all bound up in a complex form of reverence--then he had piety aplenty and deep.

He came from a family that in ten generations had never strayed more than thirty miles from the salt water farm they settled in the 1630s. His own inland farm--a hardscrabble place if there ever was one (and only about thirty miles from where I am writing this)--had belonged to ancestors for a hundred years before he was born in 1872. He loved that place with all its rocks and gulleys and swamps just as he loved the people who had made it, and my grandmother and my mother and all my aunts and uncles and cousins. And me too.

A river ran through it, and my grandfather used to take me across to visit the family graves where they lay behind an iron fence on a hill. We would read the inscriptions aloud, mostly names and dates, but some had sayings at the bottom, half hidden by the grass. "Until we meet again," said one, which always made my grandfather say "That's true" in the same tone that he might have said, "That scythe wants sharpening." Some of the stones had carvings on them too. He especially liked one of clasped hands. His own hands were as gnarled as the roots of an old oak.

To watch him make a swath through the early hay was to get an idea of what a man could do. More than once I looked out at dawn and saw him already there, swinging down a dewy lane of his own making, leaning into the stroke and following through with the blade flat to the earth until the pick-up at the end. He laid the grass the way he had been taught, which was the way it had been done in the swales by the shore three hundred years before him. He taught me how to do it too and how to turn the rows so they would dry and how to build a wagon load so the hay wouldn't slide.

He taught me how to milk a cow so as to coax out all her milk and leave nothing in her bag to sour, which was the right way, he told me, since Adam first milked. Then he would lead me into the house for a breakfast of boiled bullbeef such as farmers had always liked. Maybe my grandmother was upset about something when we came in. Then he would stand me at the window to gaze into the orchard while on the other side of the stove he would talk to her softly

until she began to laugh. Although I listened carefully, I never could hear what he said to her, but in the end we had a happy breakfast. I believe his piety had much to do with it.

After my grandmother died and went across the river to join the others, my grandfather's heart began to pain him. Sometimes he had to stop scything and sit down, or drop the cow's teats and press his head into her side. About a week before he died, he stopped working altogether, which I knew meant that the pain had gotten worse than most people would bear without crying, though he didn't. He lay in the bed with the maple headboard that four generations and my grandmother had died in, and he talked as calmly as he had ever talked to everyone who came in--to my mother and father, to my uncles and aunts, to my cousins and me.

A few minutes before he died, he groaned. It was a dark afternoon in late December, and in spite of the fire the room was cold. My mother said she wished she could do something to help him, but he told her there was nothing she could do. "God will send death when He is ready," he said. It was the only time I had heard him mention God, and it surprised me. Then he clasped his hands and said, "Until we meet again," as simply as if he were saying "That load is high enough. Take it to the barn." Which seemed to me as true and pious as anything I had ever heard. "Until we meet again." I believed him then, and I believe him now.