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A Corner of Maine

Richard Card

My grandfather would pierce the hook through the mouth of the frog as if he were sewing a button on a coat. Of course, the poor thing would still be alive, my father assured me, and would paddle along the surface of the lake in lazy frog-brained half strokes until, rising from the lake's cold deep, a trout would seize the bait, swallowing the victim whole. My grandfather's rod arched. I imagine — as if I am recalling an event of which I was an actual witness — there must have been sounds of nylon line screeching out, my grandfather chomping the stem of his pipe, a pail scraping across the wooden ribs of the rowboat. But these sounds, these half-false recollections, grow more distant the more I exert myself to recall them. By the time I was old enough to take notice of my grandfather — as a man not wholly coincident with my own existence, as a sulky driver and trainer of horses, as a fireman on the old B&M railroad, as a veteran of World War One — he hardly ever fished. He was content, rather, to sit on the porch of the cottage on the lake in Maine and talk horse with my father and uncles. If it horrified me to think that the frogs I caught in my bare hands, the athletic leopards and avuncular bulls, could be tortured in the manner my father had described, this was another measure of the world's refusal to yield to my understanding, and from an early age I resigned myself to an oblique disinterest that would not compel the world to cohere with the symmetry I rather hoped it might.

My grandfather could wiggle his ears without moving his temples; he unfolded the blade of his jackknife and whittled a branch to a point as sharp as a Viking sword (of which I was particularly fond in those days); his hands, soft as oil-soaked paper and mottled and fretted with excess skin, seized my shoulders in them until I held out my own right hand and squeezed his, "like a man." The pipe was ubiquitous. In attempting to federate those disparate elements of Grampy's being into some recognizably anthropic form, the pipe — corn cob or meerschaum — never fails to appear first. It is the key to the renaissance of his countenance in my memory. Once it is in place, his mouth, his eyes, the whole green backdrop of those mornings in Maine, will spontaneously follow. He had sturdy regular teeth, engagingly white, and the pipe was clenched stolidly in them; his shirtfront was perpetually sprinkled with holes burnt by spilled tobacco embers, for which he was being forever scolded by my grandmother. But he belonged to that epoch of American history, when the heads of families, at least if they were Anglo and Protestant, could be expected to serve as individual agents of a national decorum, administering to the realms of their dining tables and private dens, and these disparate elements of audacity and probity chafed in him — a genetic stamp, like the way I cross my legs

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exactly as he did — as they would fray the psyches of almost all the Card men I have known.

The adventures of his life occurred early, when he was a young man not yet married. Before the war he had set out for the western Dakotas and lived the rough-and-ready life of a roving sawman and river pig. Hacking down the last of the first-growth spruce and Douglas fir and strapping the overgrown logs to hissing clamorous steam donkeys, bunking with other aspiring Bunyans in those flea and rodent infested lodgepole tenements, he lasted only a year.¹ By the spring he had contracted some mysterious illness that confounded the camp doctors and was sent packing back East on a train to contemplate his fate. By the time he reached Portland all of his hair had fallen out and he had lost thirty pounds from an already lean Card body. For more than a month my great-grandfather worried over the young prodigal as Grampy sweated the disease, still undiagnosed, out of his body and drifted in and out of consciousness in the same back bedroom he had occupied as a boy. When he did finally recover, with little trace of the ravages of his struggle, Grampy began in earnest to court my grandmother, whom he had known before his western odyssey but now was graduating from high school and attracting the attention of competing suitors.

They were married not long before Woodrow Wilson's promise to keep the country out of the European war was broken by the propaganda that grew out of the torpedoing of the British liner *Lusitania* in the spring of 1915. Two years later, Grampy, along with some million of the belated American Expeditionary Force, was in the Western Theater, wearing a tin-plate helmet. The domestic tranquillity he must have been seeking after nearly dying on the frontier was met by a violent reciprocal; acolytes of modern psychology might refer to it as the externalization of his own internal struggle but I prefer to consider as a most unfortunate and irrelevant (to any internal struggle) fallout of interlaced alliances among collapsed Habsburg regimes and the catalytic event of a Bosnian Serb firing a pistol in Sarajevo. Now twenty-five, father of his first son — my uncle Linwood — Grampy was in France shuttling cannon to the front and shell-shocked doughboys and corpses away from it. When I was a high school student working on a project of collecting and collating information on local and family history, I tried to ask him about his experiences in World War One. That, he said abruptly, tamping his pipe in the palm of his hand and spilling the ashes into an ashtray, was one subject he would never wish to discuss. There was such a firmness to that shut door that even a boy of sixteen would not consider knocking on it again.

There is a gap in the narrative here. What must have been the most momentous event of his life turns out to be the most conspicuously absent in my attempt to fit the pieces together. The next we see him he has returned from Europe with the survivors of Black Jack Pershing's conquerors, unwounded and untraumatized as far as I know. Probably he did not ship out immediately after the November 1918 Armistice, but was not allowed to return to Maine until the spring of 1919. I imagine him holding a kit bag, with a duffel over his shoulder, trudging up the long dirt road that led to his in-law's farm at the top of the hill. There is still snow along the shaggy side of the road, and he is wearing his doughboy uniform, those khaki leggings and a cap rakishly tilted on his head. Years later, when I was a boy in the back seat of the family station wagon as our family criss-crossed the country on its annual summer vacation, my father would sing the famous Irving Berlin song of his father's era,

“Pack Up Your Troubles.” It is this song I place in my grandfather’s head as he climbs that hill. He is pursing his lips to whistle it, perhaps more ambivalently than he might have two years earlier, but he is whistling it nonetheless. As he blinks at the unreal vision of his house, cramped with various in-laws and his own child, who in his absence has grown to a toddler, with its rickety barn and amber hay fields reminiscent of Homer’s famous “Veteran in the Field,” a Ford Model T under the shed, he must have uttered, though he never in his life went to church, some prayer.

I do not know exactly what the cottage meant to him as it was being erected in the early thirties. I do know that Grampy, his father-in-law — my maternal great-grandfather, one-armed, son of a Civil War veteran, and a presence known in the family history mainly by his devotion to Theodore Roosevelt — and various friends and relatives were spending weekends driving out from Portland to search for a likely plot of land. Grampy had done well enough in the years since the war to consider building a summer home, though after the market collapse of 1929 it must have been a stretch even with his father-in-law’s financial alliance. The site Grampy and my great-grandfather finally located was at the end of one of the fire lanes that penetrated the fringe of spruce, pine, and oak swamps around the lake, not ten feet from the shoreline of Sebago. It was about forty miles from Portland, more than an hour’s drive into the country. Although neighboring cottages are, and were even in those days, a shouting distance away from one another, there is a sense of solitude and serenity to the plot of land they chose, which faces the lake from a shallow inlet and is sheltered by three or four islands a forty-five minute canoe paddle away.²

Late in the fall of 1932 the cottage was nearly finished, hard in the beginnings of the depression. One of my family’s most often recalled stories has it that as the last coats of paint were being brushed on the clapboards, my uncle Andrew, five or six at the time, noticed flames spurting from some rags near the back door. When he ran to tell his father he was pooh-poohed, and Grampy turned his back on the boy and continued with his task for some time before he realized that the boy had not been imagining the fire.

By then it was too late. The entire house went up in flames and burned to the ground before the fire engines arrived. Only a few odds and ends were saved: a wicker chair, maybe an icebox, the kitchen table, maybe not even that. I imagine my grandfather and his father-in-law, with the two boys, Linwood, now fifteen or sixteen and already sinewy and reserved, nearly the age at which his father had gone to seek adventure in the West, and Andrew, plucky and moon-faced, like a cartoon character from that era, Sluggo, or Moon Mullins, tossing ineffectual pails of lake water on the growing inferno, Grampy dashing through the front door and retrieving a chair, his face blackened and sweat drenched, my one-armed great-grandfather bellowing that he was a damned fool, the two boys screaming at the top of their lungs but somehow delighted with the savage flames and the preposterousness of these revered grown men acting like desperate children. And there they must have stood, finally, exhausted all of them, with the paltry evidence of Grampy’s bravery littered in the yard around them, as charred joists collapsed and window glass popped, and finally the fire engines wailed down the fire lane to douse the blackened pile and the men stood hands on hips looking on.

As my father, who was an infant and must have been back in Portland with my grandmother when the cottage burned, tells the story, the insurance had been discussed with an agent, papers signed, but no premium paid, so for a few weeks there

was some question as to whether the claim would be remitted at all. But there was a family friend. The investigation turned up nothing. The next year, with accounts filled with insurance money, a new cottage was begun from the template of the old; almost identical to its progenitor, it was completed by the end of the summer.

There is something familiarly Sisyphean in this, some obstinance in the face of better judgment that might qualify as a genetic tick were it not for the fact that so many of that generation seem from our technologically comfortable end of the century to have endured similar trials with no more recorded complaint than if they were perpetually swinging on their sun porches in a rosy nostalgic glow. The “moral” of the rebuilding of the cottage was that of an era bracketed by two Roosevelt presidents, blustery and indefatigable, a Dutch Calvinist resignation to one’s fate in another world but bully certain to make an impression in this. If my great-grandfather must have despised Franklin for his abandonment of the Grand Old Party, he could never be wholly unimpressed by this Roosevelt’s immunity from the forces of nature and death. No mere catastrophe, no sickness in darkened rooms, could keep either of them down.

In my earliest memories of coming to the cottage, it is not electrified. Plumbing consists of a single cast-iron pump bent over a steel sink. Refrigeration of a sort is managed by lowering a dumbwaiter into a “cellar” — a pit in the ground. To a boy, its primitiveness constituted a mysterious allure: there was the thrill of snakes that slithered from out of the space between the earth and the cottage underside; there was a rack of moose antlers above a window of stained glass; upstairs, curiously, the walls did not go all the way to the ceiling and you could overhear those nocturnal grumbling and rustling of sheets that somehow signaled a dynamic forbidding world in which secrets were revealed, adult rituals enacted, one’s future foretold. My brother and I slept in the same bed in those days, and I as the older would tease and elbow him until shushed by the adults who, it never occurred to me, could hear us as well as we could hear them. Most evocatively, the cottage’s outhouse was entered through the obstacle of a woodshed; there in a sweet pungence of dried oak and birch splits, amid webs of spiders whose tenancy of the comers was perhaps more binding than mine to the oval hole over the latrine, I experienced a sensation of one dimension blooming into another, the sensation of one’s body as an object at the center of its own imaginative creation.

A light from outside was sifting through early yellowing birch leaves and a netting of cobwebs, which slanted through a single tiny window as one positioned oneself over the latrine. The moted cone shattered into a hundred brittle pieces against the linoleum floor and the roll of wrinkled toilet paper that had spent its lonely existence out in the shed through the winter. Here, with one’s little half-nude body sweating in the woodshed latrine, one’s bathing suit around one’s ankles, and the shouts and splashing outside seemingly miles away, came the first peculiar consciousness of one’s self as involuntarily removed from the quotidian activity of the world, and the task of one’s life artificially introducing one’s self to that world.

The cottage serves me as a measure of my growing up better because of the intermittence of our excursions to it. I appear as a character in a movie montage, twenty years passing in a sequence of well-chosen vignettes. At the earliest I seem to be able to recall events before my birth: the flames twitching through the windows of the first cottage; Grampy chugging through a soup of early morning steam and returning over a clear lake with a streamer of trout for Grammy’s breakfast — I smell the fish,

as if temporal conventions were insufficient barriers to the truly active Jungian memoirist which I have, paradoxically, involuntarily, become. In one freeze frame I am constructing an elaborate fort of sand, with realistic parapets, a match packet for a moat bridge; in another, I am spying on my sister, who is kissing a neighbor boy, and I interrupt the lovers with a splashing of my oar like a beaver's admonitory tail. Here is the family, my young father and young mother (so they appear in this Ektachromatic mirage, both in their forties, with healthy tans, my father at the Parcheesi board with his broad shaggy chest, my mother rinsing lettuce by pumping the pump's crooked arm), my siblings bored with the trove of board games with which my mother, like a pioneer woman who lugs the family piano in a Conestoga wagon from Indiana to Oregon, insisted on filling the station wagon.

In the years of my maturing, my grandparents became visitors to this place as our nuclear family became its primary tenants. Grammy and Grampy's room, at the end of the hall upstairs, was preserved unchanged as long as they lived, with a mysterious and somewhat gothic amalgam of decaying canvas, birchbark coasters, and horse blanket odors. During the seventies the room came to signal to me a kind of prohibited intimacy that, outwardly at least, was shared with their generation more than with us children of the seventies. A bone vanity set and porcelain chamber pot, glimpsed fugitively through a cracked door, were possessed of a meaning the deeply nascent historian/memoirist in me could not quite assimilate. Rather, the compilation of my grandparents' memories — of the Titanic's sinking, of Babe Ruth, of a doctor coming in a horse-drawn sleigh in the middle of the night to deliver my father and uncles, of so many things — seemed to draw them closer to the strangers of their own generation than to me or my brother and sister, who were bound to them by a happenstance of some borrowed genes but nothing more.

In the last years of their visits, when I was away at college and my attendance at these family functions became rather rare, Grampy withdraws still further from my feeble attempts to retrospectively wrest some semblance of him into prose: he had not fished in years and had grown to a static if not unremarkable presence, emphysemic, half-deaf, cancer-ridden, his sweaters pocked with holes from the tobacco embers, his vigorous lead-gray hair covered by a forties-style gentleman-gambler slouch cap that he was careful to tip to my mother, whom he flattered to the last. We did not have too much to say to each other, but he would talk horse with my father for hours (did I mention that he was a state of Maine Hall of Fame sulky driver, and in arcane circuits very famous for spectacular drives down the home stretch; as I recall, he made yet another such comeback when he was in his seventies and returned to the state fairgrounds for another string of dramatic victories, clicking and eee-aahing his trotters to photo finishes, the youthful tautness of some half century past returning to his countenance for an instant as he and the horse combined Pan-like to defeat less enchanted teams? No, I believe I did not), and I, fast becoming the painstaking eavesdropper, would gaze out at the cuneiform wakes drawn by pushy motorboats in the azure tabula rasa and, with the irritating half removal of a would-be writer from the workaday world, would hoard the talk as reference for some future novel or genealogic essay.

As for Grammy in those days, there is somewhere in Proust a description of the narrator's maid, Françoise, which fits my grandmother so aptly that it is redundant to try to describe her as she appears on the porch of our decidedly unproustian cottage. I mention the character of Françoise in connection with my grandmother re-

flexively, as a pointed foot kicks upward in response to a hammered knee. The resemblance is perhaps dubious to those who know my grandmother and Proust equally, but Grammy, in ubiquitous apron, stout, scolding, with mischievous quietly amused cornflower blue eyes, shared Françoise's exasperation in degree if not in kind. Where Proust's narrator brought Albertine to his quarters, my father and my uncle Andrew once introduced a pet pig to a living room full of my grandmother's lady church friends, which prank must have educed her expected wrath and the two boys were sent snickering into separate corners, where they served out their sentences for the morning.

After Grampy died, a few days before my graduation from college, my father would pick up Grammy at the house at the top of True Street in Portland. On her own now, she seemed to blink at the brightness of the universe. She would scold us now-adult or near-adult children as she must have my father and his brothers — one of whom, Linwood, was to die prematurely, before Grammy, of a brain tumor. She mowed the cottage scraggly back lawn and read current novels on the front porch. She appeared to emerge, as Grampy had on the state fair half mile tracks, again in late age, like a cicada which digs out of its seventeen-year chrysalis to blink (one anthropomorphizes) into an April sunlight. She moves — a curious almost dancing motion — blithely but suddenly, with precipitous unexpected sliding of her feet and a jerking of her shoulders, proving to us — not to herself, for she never doubted it — her agelessness. She possessed a genius for mirth that must have made her such a great catch at nineteen, which did not abandon her in her eighties.

My father, the baby of the family, as I reciprocally was the oldest, and she made a sparkling duo. They teased each other adoringly with that private mutually sheltering love that is the lovely late bloom of a mother and her youngest boy's early infatuation. In her presence my father was transformed into the impish child he had at least partly sequestered within his cloak of professional and familial decorum — he was the principal of the junior high school I attended as a skittish and scholastically indifferent eleven- and twelve-year-old. He would slap her rear end with a towel and she did the same in return; he danced with her on the cottage kitchen floor; they fussed over each other with a palpable adoration that was bathed in a twilight pathos that had left them in effect if not actually — for my uncle Andrew occupied an oblique periphery of the relationship — sole survivors of an extended family that had clustered around our lakeside cottage in the thirties and forties seeking refuge from the clamor of depression-era Portland and the newspaper accounts of storm troopers grinding Europe underfoot. Eventually, both my uncles would be sent off on troop ships to battle the Huns as Grampy had done two score and some years earlier.

Here's where the montage gets jumbled. The dream of one's life, the haphazardness of one's academic and venereal educations, the secession of births and deaths, marriages and casual friendships, so rearranges the cast of characters on stage that it's impossible to figure precisely where one fits in, if at all. Summer brought new friends to the cottage while other supporting characters disappeared, heard from only in Christmas cards with computer-printed greetings: "Hello All!" My mother and father, freed from having to migrate with us children in the station wagon, grew more adventurous in their annual peregrinations, visiting the Caribbean, Europe, leaving us near-adults on our own to look after the house in Massachusetts. Although by the eighties the cottage had been electrified — a primitive bathroom adjoining

the kitchen installed in the seventies had made the deeply mysterious midnight trips to the woodshed a thing of the past — it was a place we no longer thought of collectively as a stage for the genealogical drama. Sometimes it was rented out to strangers who knew nothing of its place in the family history.

Several summers, when I was caddying at a local golf course or operating a freight elevator in a cardboard box factory to help pay for college, I did not make it up at all. Then when I did undertake the drive north on Route 95 and west across 302, it was with caravans of college buddies more attuned to beer swilling and water skiing than capricious delvings into the past, which comprised my growing awareness of myself as a product of some inexorable force more potent than my capacity for reckoning with it. My father and I would visit in October to inspect the cottage, chainsaw some fallen limbs, and spruce it up with a fresh coat of paint. Inevitably, so late in the season, the water table in the lake would have been lowered, the lake's surprisingly chaste belly of mud and sand bar exposed.

One finds faded pink plastic toys discarded exactly where renters' children must have dropped them in pursuit of some passing dog or when they were called in for lunch, I imagine. Rowboats teeter on the edges of their keels. A hard cobalt light passes through the limbs of the birches. There is a sense of dread melancholy to these autumn excursions, more potent than in the other seasons: abandonment prevails, the last of the cottages being tidied up, shades drawn, toasters unplugged. One winter the wooden rowboat that had belonged to Grampy was set out in the woods instead of being stored in the garage, and there over the course of a decade it decayed until the possibility of its restoration, which I always promised to undertake, became a pipe dream.

With exception, my own present of my post-graduate years at the cottage seems less interesting to me than those tableaux of fading Ektachrome. There are exceptional kisses, fondly and frequently remembered, bestowed by a girl whose name I will not reveal in this memoir. She and I would drive together from my apartment outside Boston, and she would lay her trusting head in my lap, and when she left me the next year there remained, like an afterimage inscribed beneath the lids of my eyes, an optical — multisensorial — illusion of these avid kisses of which we partook on the islands Hawthorne himself must have explored, where Hester might have been conceived. She is wearing a pink bathing suit of shiny nylon — or is this another hallucination? — and one of the straps, tentatively, has slipped off her shoulder ever so slightly. She is tracing the bridge of my nose with her finger and laughs at my shyness, kisses me fitfully on the lips, and retreats, diving into her own reversed reflection in the water. This island had been the site of a summer camp for boys and some of the buildings — cabin-style dorms and a kitchen — are still standing. I feel their presences behind me while she swims, a pink blur with her fluttering curls, '30s style, shedding the water when she comes up for air. The phantom boys, refugees from urban streets, line up for breakfast with their fried-egg-burdened trays; their lithe arms draw bows on the archery range; their boisterous voices infringe on my contemplation of E's deliquescent countenance. But by now the chimeras has vanished: there is no sight of the pink blur, and I bring my index finger to my lips, attempting to duplicate the sensation of hers which have dissolved.

The exquisite precision of these details, these scraps, cannot — perhaps must not — be summoned by will. To lay one's head on one's pillow and reflect that tonight I will dream about my grandfather or my former lover seems to violate the

semi-inviolable membrane — a bat's wing — that spans between the dreaming and waking worlds. As historians prove, there is no surer recipe for obliterating the past than to consciously attempt to resurrect it from the haven of its own quiddity, but lick the crumbs of a madeleine from the tips of one's fingers, catch a phrase of a song when spinning the dial on a radio, glimpse on the street the dimpled cheek of a stranger that could not have but emerged from the same ancestral stew as one's former lover, and what was presumed to have been lost may momentarily suspend the persistent velocity of the present.

To wit: As long as my family and now I alone have been coming to the cottage, and doubtless decades before, there has appeared in the Fourth of July gloaming an armada of little white boats, twenty or thirty of them. Linked together by bow ropes, every Fourth of July the chain crosses the lake to an Adirondack-style resort to the right of the cottage and then back again. Between the appearance of the first boat and the vanishing of the last stern behind a piney peninsula less than an hour elapses, yet the harmonic effect of this charming picture, repeated year after year like a series of forgeries intended to represent a long lost original painting — or is it? — like a single musical note that triggers sympathetic vibrations in the furniture, can be represented as an experience of such singularity that the emotion it evokes in me is exactly that evoked in my grandfather and great-grandfather as they were lugging tar shingles up a ladder. On second thought, I wonder if this is closer to literary presumption than the facts. As a child I probably sat at the dining table concentrating on *Parcheesi* rather than paying attention to any armada. Chances are Grampy and his father-in-law didn't care much about such things either.

But the little boats are now useful to describe my own psychic predisposition, which hopes that the sensation of awe is infinitely repeatable. I am anxious to wriggle out of the self-spun cocoon of unconnected experience; I possess the writer's vocational faith in patterns and symbols that is shared by children and paranoiacs. The facts: the armada comes from a girls' summer camp, and the voices of the young sailresses that flutter across the crenellations of the lake surface like weightless sparrows seem to invite an eavesdropper into their boats to share their giddy disclosures. This is a fact, and if I cannot verify that these girl campers' secrets are literal echoes of their mothers' and grandmothers' revelations from their own long-ago camp days, still I will attempt to reconstruct the chirping voices into temporal Logos that guide the constancy of change.

It is not perverse, I think, to choose this nonfamilial picture to reestablish a rapport between the familial and the cosmic, the unique and universal. Go back a few generations and the genetic input of a single ancestor is practically meaningless. We are as likely to share a tendency to cross our legs tightly and lean forward in pensive gesture — a posture that seems to be owned by the Cards — with a complete stranger. Yet we do wish to decipher ourselves to ourselves by unraveling the family heritage. We are compelled to do it. Can my writing of this sentence be reduced to an ancestral reflex, for instance, a genetic stamp that refuses to be obliterated by the sweep of history? By writing the sentence am I serving as a 1990s medium for the inchoate yearnings of an unacknowledged great-great-great-great-grandparent, a horse thief or ambitious Anglican, retching over the prow of a second-rate Mayflower in the middle of the Atlantic?

Last summer, on a perfectly sun-burnished July evening, I happened to watch the armada for what might have been the twentieth time and found myself entertaining

the idea that the girl campers were offering themselves, not unselfconsciously, as willing illustrators of the patterns of my personal history. Each year that goes by the girls have added to the impression that life *means* something. Sitting on the front porch, beer in hand, as some fireworks bloomed over an island and the girls' singing grew faint, I believed I agreed with them. My brother and his family had come from Seattle for a few weeks and my sister from Boston with hers. It was the first time all of us had been together at the cottage in perhaps a decade, and the little children were spending their days exploring the old woodshed and canoeing in the frog pond where Grampy used to catch his bait. In the evenings my father and mother were cooking and playing board games, as they used to. Once, when my father came out to the front porch, I mistook him for my grandfather; it may have been the beer, and although my father and Grampy had never looked much like each other, my father's now silvery hair, his slightly stooped posture, his natural taciturnity grown more acute with the passing of the years, reminded me of Grampy so unmistakably that it produced a sensation of calamitous vertigo. I dared not get out of my seat.

Was I a boy of ten or eleven, listening in on the horse talk, or a man of thirty-some poised on the brink of my own marriage? The mistake flashed by in an instant, as they do, and I said nothing to my father, but for the rest of the evening I could not rid myself of the impression that time had slipped in that moment, like a gear of a bicycle. Both my own Grammy and Grampy Card were gone, their mysterious bedroom redecorated, the vapor of their history stale in the unvisited corners of the cottage, where rusting oar locks and old fishing tackle sat unused. We children were older than my father and mother in the days when our family unloaded the station wagon in the middle of the night; and my father and mother are now called Grampy and Grammy.

The beer went down smoothly, and when it was time to go to sleep, in the same bed in which my brother and I had listened for the snores and whispers in the other upstairs rooms, I looked up at the ceiling of knotty pine. Feeling the lids of my eyes heavy with a portent of sleep, a lineament of one face, then another, and still another, emerged from the pitch and knots of the planks, until the whole of the ancestral tree, and with her flamboyant smile, my old love seemed to be present, staring down at me, and in that warm confluence of waking and dreaming I was comforted by the hope that some day a scant outline of my own countenance might emerge from the swirls of the cottage's bare ceiling to confound and invigorate the imagination of a yet unborn great-great-great-grandchild, and that this distant spawn, sleeping in this same bed, would be set free from the mortal coil, as I had been, by the dusty, incomplete, and beautiful vision.❧

Notes

1. Indeed, Paul Bunyan and his faithful companion Babe entered the lexicon of popular legend in 1914, a few years after my grandfather journeyed to the American West. The giant woodsman and the Blue Ox had become part of the American vocabulary via a logging company pamphlet, just as half a century earlier, steel-driving John Henry came to be known for his prodigious exploits on the Big Bend

Tunnel on behalf of the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad, incorporating elements of commercialism and mythification in a particularly unapologetic American fashion.

2. At the end of our fire lane stands a house that shares a parking lot with an old-time convenience and penny-candy store, a house in which Nathaniel Hawthorne is said to have spent at least part of his boyhood. It is not much of a tourist attraction, as far as I know, and Sebago does not figure prominently in any of Hawthorne's romances, but the coincidence of the author's presumably having to trespass over what would become our property to go for a swim or canoe out to the islands would feed the pretensions of any twentieth-century American writer, and I myself cannot quite be excused for looking over my shoulder at the ghost, in a bathing costume, as he mucks for snapping turtles or digs for ancient Indian arrowheads.