

## *The Vineyard*

### *Cold Milk*

The sun was baking the ground between the rows of grapevines into a sizzling powder. Every step raised a cloud of suffocating dust, so it was better to just sit in the dirt. The dusty yellowish house three grape rows away was even less pleasant. Mama had sent Arlea and me outside to escape the suffocating heat inside. Here at least there was a slight puff of breeze once in awhile, and the grapevines gave a little shade.

There must be something better, something cooler somewhere near. But my sister was ominous, there to watch over me. Not long before, people had made such a fuss that I was two. I had learned to hold up two fingers when people asked how old I was. That seemed very important to the grown-ups, and it made me feel big and important, too. But my sister was older, and huge, and magisterial, and I didn't dare object to anything with her watching me.

Suddenly she got up from the dirt and ran into the house. Freedom called. Just a few feet away the rows of grape vines ended at a paved road. I was quickly on my way. The road was hot, too, and the black pavement caught the sun's

heat and threw it back at me. But I had my friend, my little yellow dog, with me. With him dancing circles around me the world couldn't be all bad. I had a white line to follow, right down the middle, and that line must go somewhere better than this dirty vineyard and that tiny hot dingy house.

But every hiker needs to stop and rest. I sat down on the white line and surveyed my new world. I was past the vineyard to a grove of walnut trees. They made a dense shade over the dampish earth that looked much better than the dusty vineyard or the hard black road.

On the other side was a dingy, rambling, unpainted building that looked old and ready to fall down. Not a person in sight anywhere, but there was a gasoline pump in front. I loved to watch my daddy get gas from pumps like that. A man would pull a handle back and forth, and the gasoline would foam and bubble up into the glass tank on top with big numbers running up the side. Then Daddy would give the man some money, and the gasoline would drain through a hose into the car. That was a wonderful thing to see.

Suddenly my survey of the institution was interrupted by a woman rushing out of the building toward me. She grabbed me up in her arms and ran back to the building, my dog barking and fussing after. But she wouldn't let the dog in. She sat me down at a table and started asking me questions. But I wouldn't answer. I just sat and looked at the tablecloth. It was slick and shiny with red and white squares about as big as the end of my thumb. I wanted to put my fingers on the white squares, but the woman wouldn't stop asking questions, so I just sat and sat and sat without a word.

Finally she went to the refrigerator and opened the door. I had never seen a refrigerator before, but I could feel the cool from it when the door came open, and I had heard Mama telling Daddy we needed milk and other fresh things to eat and needed some way to keep them from spoiling in the hot weather. I was sure this thing was what Mama was talking about. It was to examine closely. Sort of a pale yellow box on

curved legs, a wide door in front with a shiny handle, and a big round coil thing on top. But my examination was cut short when the woman took out a jar of milk, poured a tall glass, and set the glass in front of me. It was wonderful cold. I had found my destination. It had been a good journey.

But the reverie didn't last long. The woman talked into a brown box on the wall. Men came, talking fast in low voices. Soon I had to leave the wonderful red checkered tablecloth and the cool milk and go in a car with a strange man in a funny suit. And soon I was back in the dingy yellow house. But it wasn't so bad. The day was cooler already, and Mama was crying and laughing and hugging me, and Arlea just stood off to the side with silence on her face. Then Daddy drove up, and he talked a little while with the man in the funny suit, then he came inside and hugged me. And all the world settled back into the way it always was.

### *Boxes*

Daddy took me to a place where fruit was being sorted and packed. Women sat in a row on either side of a long moving belt where the fruit was rolling along. They looked at each fruit rolling by and picked some off to roll on a different belt in a different direction. Down at the end a machine was making boxes. Boards of different sizes and shapes came off different piles and ran into the machine. The machine let some lie flat, others it stood up on end. Nails jiggled down from a bin and sorted themselves into slots. Then the machine made a big whoosh downward and pushed the nails all at once into the boards. Suddenly the thing flipped over. More boards scooting in from the piles, more nails jiggling down, another whoosh, and the finished box went scooting out the other end to where the different belts dropped the sorted fruit. There women were picking up the fruits, looking at each one, then

putting them gently into the boxes. It was all very noisy and busy. I thought it would be exciting to work there.

### *Camp Meeting*

Many tents near the shore of Lake Tahoe—some in rows close together with families living in them, some bigger tents where people sat and sang and listened to preachers, and other big tents filled with kids listening to ladies telling stories. Sand and dusty flat everywhere, a few scattered trees, and clumps of grass and bushes raising humps in the flat.

But the walks down to the lake shore with Daddy were fine. A wide stretch of soft sand, scattered with stones, swallowed me up to my ankles. Daddy liked to throw flat stones to make them skip on the water. Sometimes one would make big skips, then smaller and smaller skips, until it just skated along before sinking.

One time on the way back Daddy stopped to talk to a man, and after a long, long time I grabbed Daddy's leg and began walking round and round—between, out, then between again, dragging my hand around his knee as I made my circles while he spread his legs apart to give me room.

Then I looked up to say something to Daddy—and it wasn't Daddy. It was the other man. And he and Daddy were laughing at me. I was so embarrassed I grabbed Daddy's hand and pulled him toward our tent. I never wanted to walk down to the shore with him again until the next day.

### *The Clearing*

We lived in a tent in a clearing in the forest. It was like the tents at the campmeeting, except that it was set up on a platform with board sides a little higher than my head. The dark brownish grey canvas rose to a high peak. There were steps up from the ground to the floor, with a broad porch in

front of the tent flaps and a space under the floor to play. The ground sloped, so that the rear of the platform was near the ground, but the front was high. There was a sort of railing around the porch, but it had large open spaces, and Mama was always afraid I would fall off.

It was near Pollock Pines. I guess it must have been almost a year since I ran away from home at the grape vineyard near Turlock.

Willis and George were home with us for the summer, and the tent was crowded with too many beds. Sheets and blankets hung from wires around some of the beds, which made the space seem smaller still. There was a small table near the front where Daddy would sometimes sit and read his Bible at night by the light of a kerosene lantern hanging from a wire overhead.

Daddy set up a place for Mama to cook outside. There was a circle of rocks with a bent iron frame to hold the pans and for a fire to burn underneath. No problem for wood. The forest was full of dry sticks that made a hot fire.

The huge trees all around the clearing made a threatening fence. I thought there must be bears and lions in there, but my brothers had great fun running in and out of the forest picking up cones and throwing them at each other. Some of the cones were covered with sticky pitch that made the hands dirty but burned hot in the fire.

The ground in the clearing was thick with plants called mountain misery. They came about up to my knees, and they scratched and smelled stinky and left sticky smelly stuff on my skin if I rubbed on them.

Daddy was gone a lot. He had some bee hives, and he worked for the apple ranchers in the area or whatever work he could get. Mama was mostly busy cooking and washing clothes. She heated the wash water in big square honey cans on the cooking fire place in the circle of rocks. Then she put the hot water in a round tub with soap and stirred them with a stick for awhile. And after that she had a wonderful board

thing with glass ribs that she rubbed the clothes on up and down.

She set up an ironing board on the porch of the tent platform and ironed clothes with irons that she heated over a little fire in a sort of big metal dish near by. When one iron wasn't hot enough any more, she would clip the wooden handle onto one of the other irons heating there.

With my brothers running in and out of the forest, Daddy gone working, Mama busy cooking and washing and ironing, and Arlea hiding in the tent, I was pretty much on my own most of the time. But I kept close to the tent and to the car parked in front. The car was almost always there because Daddy drove his truck when he was working. It had a flat bed to hold his bee hives and other things. He was careful to explain to me that it was a 1937 Ford ton and a half, younger than I by almost a year. Mama wanted me to stay always between the car and the tent, but that space was small, and when I felt very brave, and when Mama wasn't looking, I would run around the car to the other side.

One day I was more brave than usual and ran around the car again and again. After several trips around Willis chased after me, and he started shouting and jumping around and yelling about a rattlesnake. He picked up a board and beat it to death. After that they wouldn't let me away from the tent any more. I was glad when we moved down to Placerville to the Thiele house.