

Blueberry Picking

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We each took a pail and set out in different directions. I had never picked low-bush berries before, and there were tricks I didn't know. When I tried to scoop off a handful at once, I crushed some of the berries and pulled a leaf or a bit of stem along with them. My pail was full of foreign matter, which would make for a lot of picking over back at the farm. Yet when I tried to be careful, I went so slowly that it would have taken all morning to pick one bucket. The trouble with sitting was that I had to slide myself over the bumpy rocks, and I began to feel paralyzed where I sat. The heaviest stems of berries were always slightly out of reach. I tried kneeling, but my knees gave out. I tried standing, and it felt all right until I unbent, when I thought I would crack apart. Finally, I sat again.

I picked and picked. I switched from the right hand to the left and back again and picked two-handed, and still my pail was only a quarter full. I realized that even when I had filled it, it would barely cover the bottom of one of the big pails. I thought we would never fill even one of them. Then I heard my grandfather grunt as he straightened up, and saw him empty his full bucket into one of the big pails. "There's one," he said.

"Look at all I've done," I said, lifting my pail to show it to him.

"You don't know how to pick them yet." He walked over to me and leaned down. He took hold of a stem heavy with blueberries and stripped it clean between his index and middle fingers, without crushing a berry or tearing off a leaf. "Do you see?" he said. "You have to be gentle. You'll learn it."

In the whole morning I only filled my pail twice, while his pail emptied itself five times into our storage bins on the flat rock. My hands felt twisted out of shape and nervous with their continual darting. My back felt welded in a leaning curve. Worst of all, my throat parched with the thirst, and parched more and more as the sun rose in the sky and the sweat dried on my body. A hundred times I almost complained, or almost rose to have a drink of the water without saying anything, but each time the sight of my grandfather—picking steadily and humming to himself, and seventy-two years old—kept me silent. He worked with utter delight in the growing pile of berries.

He talked of the number of blueberry pies which we had already gathered, and all I could think of was the dampness of them. When I ate a handful of blueberries, my mouth felt better for a moment, but then felt unutterable worse: so thick that its sides would stick together, and my tongue clung to the roof of my mouth. I knew that we would break for lunch, but I had put my watch in my pocket. I kept squinting up at the sun to guess the time. Finally, when I didn't even know I was going to say it, I heard my dry voice squeaking, "I think I'll have a drink."

My grandfather pulled his gold watch from the pocket of his trousers. "My, my," he said. "It's past lunch time. Twelve-fifteen." He put his watch away and stretched carefully. "I guess we'd better do some eating."

I rose gratefully and walked toward our cache of food and water. I lifted the bottle I had started before and, though I knew I was foolish, drained it dry. A minute after I had set it back on the rock, my thirst returned. I reached for a second quart, which stood propped against a rock in the crack, and when I lifted it out, my stiff fingers slipped, and the bottle fell and rolled from me, and the water poured out over the blue rocks and drained among the blueberry plants. "Look!" I said. I was exhausted and angry to the point of tears. I could say nothing more.

My grandfather shook his head and smiled at me. "I suspect you'll wish you had that quart of water," he said. I dipped my finger in a small puddle in the rock and sucked it. The third quart had to do for both of us now, and my grandfather hadn't drunk anything yet.

"You handle the other quart," I said.

"We'll be careful with that one."

As I ate, I felt a little better. The custard pie, the pickles, and the butter in the chicken sandwiches were all damp. I ate as slowly as I could, pushing away the moment when the picking began again. When we had finished the whole bag, my grandfather tucked it tidily—waxed paper and hard-boiled-eggshells inside—into a crevice of the stone.

"Now let's have a bit of water," said my grandfather. He lifted the remaining bottle and took a mouthful, keeping it in his mouth a long time,

and letting it go down in slow sips, luxuriously. "That's good," he said, and handed it to me. I tried to do the same trick, and choked.

He stood up and stretched again. "I could relish a few minutes on the sofa just now," he said. "Don't see any sofas hereabouts." He walked to where he had left his pail, and began to pick again.

I looked at my watch. It was nearly one o'clock. On my way to my bucket, I looked in the big pails. One was nearly full, and the other was barely covered with berries on the bottom. When I sat down on the hard rock again, my old bruises of the morning felt worse than before, and I suppose I felt more tired than I did three hours later.

During the afternoon I filled my bucket more rapidly, and every time I emptied it I took a sip of water. It was my reward for being quick. I saw my grandfather wet his lips once, and stand staring across the valley below us at the hills on the other side. I stood up and watched with him, and for a moment forgot blueberries and sore backs, fatigue and thirst. But in a moment my throat contracted with its drought again, and I raced to fill up another pail.

My grandfather seemed to pick more slowly than he had picked in the morning, and when he stood up to carry the bucket to the big pail, he usually paused for a minute before walking. In the middle of the afternoon I calculated that two more bucketfuls would fill the last big pail, and I raced to fill my bucket and be done. My grandfather and I met at the big pails at the same time, and poured our blueberries to the very top. I took another sip of water, unable to speak with the dryness of my throat. About an inch was left in the bottom of the bottle and I was already thinking of the well water at home, after our walk down the mountain, but then I saw my grandfather walk back to the berries.

"What are you doing?" I said. "We filled the pails."

"Not these," he said, waving the sap bucket. "Are you tired?" He set the bucket down and walked back to where I was standing. "I didn't think of that."

"No," I said.

“We could go home,” he said. “We have plenty of berries.”

“No, no,” I said. “I don’t want to.”

I would have been ecstatic if he had overruled me, but he didn’t. He said, “You really sure?” and when I nodded he walked back to the berries. When he turned away, I lifted the milk bottle and drained the last of the water.