

## Excerpt from Introduction

**M**y great grandmother Vera – my father’s paternal grandmother – was the only American relative with whom I have had any kind of meaningful relationship during my life. She lived in a farmhouse in Milbridge, Maine, a 440-mile, eight-hour drive from Connecticut, but one that we would do regularly throughout my childhood, getting into the car in our pyjamas at five am and stopping to brush our teeth at a service station just over the Maine border, four hours later.

Vera was in her mid-eighties when I was born, having survived her husband by a decade or more, and inhabits my childhood memories in distinct and specific ways: hand stitching pieces of cloth cut into the shape of girls in sunhats onto a quilt upon which she seemed to be forever working; peering over her cat-eye glasses to watch the robins at the bird feeder she had erected mere feet from the wicker armchair in her living room window.

She slept on the ground floor in a bathroom that had been converted into her bedroom, a single quilt-covered bed next to the clawfoot bathtub, for fear that her deteriorating sense of hearing would prevent her from detecting a would-be intruder in the night. (This also meant that all three upstairs bedrooms were furnished with an enamel pot for the nighttime requirements of any overnight guests). She left her pills, separated into the daily compartments of a plastic tray, right in the middle of the dining room floor. ‘Otherwise I’ll forget to take them,’ she said.

Throughout the summer she picked wild blueberries, some to eat fresh or use in her baking but mostly to can and freeze in Folger’s coffee tins, weaving lines back and forth across the barrens, hinged at the hips, searching

for the most fruitful bunches. When she became too old to stand for hours, she resorted to bringing a folding lawn chair, upon which she would sit and reach down, picking every blueberry beneath her before moving the chair six feet or so to the side and starting on a new patch.

A faint smell of lobster, bought direct from the lobstermen's boats, permeated her house.

I remember the tissue paper thin skin of her elbows sagging as she stood on her front porch, waving to us when we drove away down US Route One.

Milbridge is less a town than it is a collection of buildings along the edge of Route One, the road that hugs the eastern coast from south to north. It has changed now, of course, but in my earliest memories it consisted of little more than a small supermarket, a laundromat, a motel, gas station and a little wooden cinema with an unmissable ripple in its single screen.

Vera's house, white clapboard and a green tin roof, was on the way out of town, heading north, surrounded by barns with dangerously bowed roofs and rolling fields, bordered by a thick pine wood. Steinbeck rolled through, once, as he zigzagged across the country from Maine to California in his pick-up truck equipped with a camper cabin mounted on the flat-bed and standard poodle Charley in tow, his attempt to rediscover an America and the Americans he feared he was losing touch with. Milbridge is thus immortalised as a fleeting mention in the resulting 1962 work *Travels with Charley*.

Vera died at the age of 95, when I was ten, and, upon the reading of her will, my parents learnt that they had inherited the camp that she had owned since the 1950s. To a Mainer, the word camp means a little cottage, typically by a body of water, generally not its owner's primary residence. Hers was less than twenty minutes from Milbridge by car, on Petit Manan Point, a thin peninsula that reaches out into the Atlantic and is serviced by a single road.

Our regular trips to Maine took on a new form. The three-room camp, which had not seen an overnight guest since Vera had stopped

renting it out to hunters in the early 1990s and had been sparsely furnished, was gradually filled. It became a tiny almost-house with one room that is kitchen, dining room and living room all at once, and two small bedrooms that only just fit a double bed. It was just enough for the five of us, as long as one person was happy to sleep on the sofa in the living room and could ignore the strange midnight whirrings and inexplicable clicking of the fridge. The camp looks out to the Atlantic and is accompanied by a stretch of cove beach lined with pink and white beach roses. At high tide, is mostly large, smooth pebbles, but at low tide, the sea recedes tens of feet, leaving clams shooting streams of saltwater through black, sodden sand.

A year after she died, my family moved to Essex, on the east coast of the United Kingdom. Getting to Maine now required a seven-hour flight, on top of the eight-hour drive, but still we did it every summer.

We began to learn things about the place that Vera had never shared. The local hikes, the paths that lead down to coves, where, if you timed it with the tides, the waves would come in over the sun-drenched mud flats and warm the frigid Atlantic water enough so that it was just about bearable to swim in. We discovered lakes inaccessible other than on foot, peaks with panoramic views of the islands in Dyer Bay.

It has been twenty years since my family moved, and yet the appeal of Down East Maine has not faded. The pilgrimages to Petit Manan continue.

It has, also, been twenty years of trying to juggle the two parts of myself, explaining my strange accent, the inevitable follow up question of 'which country do you prefer'? I have spent most of my adult life trying to reconcile an identity that I don't really recognise with a country I usually love but also often hate. My sisters – both of whom are younger than me, therefore with far fewer memories of life before England and significantly more English-sounding accents – when asked, do not necessarily answer 'America, originally,' although, admittedly, their English accents do not beget the same level of questioning. We all hold American passports, but, at that, the similarities end. For me, the niggling questions about where I come from refuse to be quelled.

We were never one of those American families with a great sense of pride in our heritage. We do not know if we herald from Ireland or Italy, like so many other East Coast families who have something upon which to pin their penchant for cooking big meals or tendency to sunburn even on overcast days.

With no paternal cousins and no other closely-related American family of which to speak, I am, invariably, drawn back, like the tide under a harvest moon, to Vera, to Maine.