

Kathleen Scavone

The Vineyard

Kelseyville's walnut groves shimmer like an emerald sea as we make our way over Glasgow Grade to the vineyard. It is a deceptively cool August morning, but, as it is only 6:30 we know how tenacious the heat will become by noon. I look over my shoulder into the rusty, beaten truck bed to check on the ice chest and picnic basket. They have rearranged themselves after Phil braked suddenly to avoid hitting a sand-colored jackrabbit. My husband is strong and sure, with quick reflexes at the wheel. Observing his profile, I note that his tanned, smooth skin belies his impending 50th birthday.

I have found myself observing him this summer, watching his actions and reactions. It is as though I am in a foreign land, trying to learn the customs of my host country. I spent much of the summer away from home, caring for my dying grandfather in Sonoma, along with attending classes at Sonoma State University. I gaze out of the rattling, old Ford's windows at the dry, golden landscape dotted now and then with classic country scenes of old barns and oak-studded hills. We turn right, onto the dusty gravel road to the thirty-acre Cabernet Sauvignon vineyard where Phil has helped pick grapes for his small winery each summer for years. We park under a massive valley oak tree, an ancient sentinel, at the northeastern point of the vineyard, where the other pickers have assembled. The call of a quail christens our arrival, then all of the grape pickers' greetings in both Spanish and English break the spell of the early morning hour.

Retrieving the picnic basket and ice chest from the truck bed, I find a place for them in the shade at the end of a meticulous row of grapes, while Phil and the vineyard manager survey the vines for potential damage due to the recent proliferation of grasshoppers and starlings. A

method of electronic bird control utilizing sound technology had been brought in to scare birds away from their potential gourmet feast, and it appears to have worked-- the vines have flourished.

I watch my husband as he begins to cut the fruit from the vine with his sharp, curved grape knife. The long and winding road from vineyard to bottle begins here. Purple-blue clusters fall into a stained, cracked five gallon bucket which was positioned under the plant as a receptacle. When the bucket is full, it will be emptied into a metal gondola which will, in turn, be pulled by a tractor and loaded onto a stake-bed truck. Then, the load of fruit will be transported to the Kelseyville pear-packing house to be weighed before the magic of the crush occurs.

Phil develops a rhythm as he works. Not a movement is wasted. This cadence is a part of him which carries over into other aspects of his life. It appears that he has gleaned insights borne of these vines, which he seems to have absorbed by toiling in the fields each summer. He takes each setback in stride: a devastating frost, the unpredictable decline of the vineyard's water table, an attack of starlings or, conversely; the windfall of an exceptional growing season is received, albeit more gratefully, with full acceptance of what is.

My grandfather's decline occurred over a six-month span. Memories surfaced and were shared before we said our goodbyes. We spoke of Fourth-of-July sparklers and watermelon on the lawn of my childhood home in Anaheim. We had the luxury of reminiscing the driving and dance lessons he gave me back then, and even laughed about his off-color jokes which Grandma disapproved of. The inevitable questions lined themselves up before me like dominoes waiting to be knocked over. Was I the granddaughter I should have been? With the boys out of the nest, was I the mother I should have been? The wife? When I confront Phil with questions like these,

he admits nothing other than fulfillment and satisfaction with our lives together, the children, the winery.

I gather gloves, hat and grape knife, and wonder: are Phil's emotions camouflaged, as he is now, bent over amongst the vines in his kaki-colored pants and shirt? Does he, in reality, have aspirations which he has shelved like his wine, which sits in perfect rows on racks, silently gathering dust in a dark cellar?

The sinuous and elegant vines give the impression of their being somehow weak or vulnerable, but despite their fragile demeanor they are remarkably strong. Great clumps of purple presents await me under the lush foliage. I stand up-right, rub my back with one hand and swipe perspiration from my forehead with the other. My eyes burn with the stuff now, but as I walk to the end of the row where the ice chest filled with cold beverages awaits, I begin to sense that somehow, all is as it should be. Each season we are steeped in hopes and expectations for a bountiful harvest. We can prune and tend and care immensely for these plants, but sometimes the forces of nature are beyond our capabilities. Here in the countryside life and death scenes are played out time and again. Hadn't the rabbit narrowly escaped death this morning while maneuvering across the highway to other untold dangers, all of which are regular occurrences in his existence? A quiet bond is taking place as I work in the vineyards near my husband. I feel a renewed sense of connectedness to him, through my surroundings- from the red volcanic soil, where roots plunge themselves deep with primal urgency, to the luxuriant vines, heady now with the sweet smell of sun-ripened fruit.