

Memoir

ON THE KNOLL

By Jacquelin Aubin Ewing

There is a place for me, there, another for my mother, and one for my husband, should he choose to occupy it. Others of the family have already arrived. My grandfather was the first —James Frederick Mallon, always known as J.F. Then came Nana (Jacquelin), then my uncle James De Vere Mallon (J.D., of course), and next his wife, Sally. They were married latish in life. Sally had been his college sweetheart, but it took them a long time to get together. It was a quarrelsome marriage and they had a lifetime of arguments to accomplish in a relatively small number of years. Lacking his favorite sparring partner, my uncle argued with anyone he could collar for the six years of life left to him following Sally's death. Several years passed before the next arrival, my mother's sister, Marjorie Mallon Truman. Her husband, Stanley, joined her in 1993.

Each new family occupant of the Graves Cemetery (just off Highway 32, west of Orland, California) was escorted by a caravan, a troupe family—a dwindling number of elder members and the occasional representative or two of the next generation. These heedless young ones would whoop and gallop among the leaning, mossy headstones at the "old" end of the grounds, while the rest of the party stood about and made small conversation, "Well, I see the Lindous haven't been pruning the shrubs here lately," or "Looks like the pyracantha is getting out of hand there next to the Glenns' plot." Recent arrivals were noted and commented upon.

I love this place. It occupies a windy knoll where the breeze lifts my hair, and brings to me the perfume of the neighboring dairy farm on the north—a splendid place of mud and green grass and alfalfa bales, a white barn and harlequin Holstein cows who view their world with acceptance and large, soft eyes. If I turn toward the south, I can count a dozen tiny ranch-houses, mostly ramshackle, each with its allotment of more-or-less dilapidated farm vehicles, randomly deployed chickens, a goat or two, and the inevitable clothesline bedizened with work-clothes, bedsheets and towels. Turning to

the west, I look up into the buttes—foothills of the Yollabolly range. Here begins sheep country. My grandfather at one time owned a goodly portion of this land. It wasn't especially desirable acreage, but sheep managed to thrive here, and a living could be made if the rains came, and the grasses flourished, and one didn't lose too many head to coyotes and harsh winters.

On a spring day, there is nowhere lovelier than this knoll. The trampled grass smells peppery—sharp and clean and the wild mustard stripes the hillside with yellow from a giant painter's brush. Golden poppies open to the sun—gaudy polka-dots flung across the waving green. There are olive trees. The breeze ripples through their gray leaves, with a sound like water tumbling over river-pebbles. Meadowlarks hurl their silvery cadenzas from fence posts, and mourning doves croon softly to each other.

A specialized taste is required to appreciate this place in summer, for it is not then lovable. The lushness of spring has evaporated. The opportunistic grasses have dried to stubble, and the north wind blows a hot dry breath across the knoll. The weather is not friendly to the shrubs lovingly planted next a loved one's resting-place. But in the evening, the ground-level markers retain the sun's warmth, and rattlesnakes emerge from their daytime crannies to hunt for field mice, and to bask on the friendly, rough stones. They find no ill in the summer wind—as could no sincere lover of this unique and lonely spot.

In December of 1964, our family caravan escorted my grandmother's ashes to the knoll. My tall, spare, sinewy "Nana" was as much a part of the land where she lived—just over the buttes and beyond Stony Creek in the next valley—as were the bending willows and the sturdy oak trees on the family ranch. She found glory in winter—each clap of thunder and flash of lightning. She loved the wind, although she was heard to remark, "The north wind just dries up the milk of human kindness in my veins!" Praise and thanks were given for sun and shower alike: all were part of God's bounty. During the darkest storms she would simply sing a little louder, "Rock of Ages Cleft for Me" or "Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam".

By the time of our winter assembly at the graveside, a storm began to boil up over the hills, and the wind howled at us from every direction, stinging our faces with needles of cold. We stamped and snorted like horses anxious to return to the barn. As the

short service drew to a close, above the roar of the wind, we heard the unmistakable honking of geese. Far above us, piercing tattered clouds, the ragged chevron appeared, great wings bearing them toward the south, calling encouragement amongst their ranks. We watched until we could see them no more. Then my mother said, "This is a day Nana would have loved!"

Any day on the knoll is a good day. It's a fine place to rest.

GRANDMOTHER

By Jacquelin Aubin Ewing

She was, without a doubt, an ungainly young girl, and she grew to be six feet tall. Tall women were not in vogue in the small mining towns of Colorado, nor were they in vogue anywhere else in the late 1800s. She was not a beauty, with her pronounced jaw, straight narrow lips, and legs like the trunks of young trees (long skirts would cover these until well into the next century). She was, apparently, the only child in her large family who was never graced with a middle name—if there was one we never knew it, and, somehow, we did not ask. Now there is no one left who could tell us.

At fifteen, she married a rancher from Kansas, eleven years her senior. He was kind, gentle, perhaps a bit weak. He saw in Jacquelin Chatfield the strength and spirit and gristle he lacked. She never let him down.

I do not think she ever went dancing, she never saw a theatre production, never tasted liquor. Her formal schooling did not stretch beyond the eighth or ninth grade, but her longing after knowledge lasted her lifetime. Books opened worlds to her: she told me "I read things I had no business reading—I read everything I could get my hands on." She read Plutarch's Lives, mythology, the Book of Mormon, old encyclopedias, history.

She must have read in the evening, by the light of kerosene lamps, during hours borrowed from precious sleep, for her days were filled with endless chores unassisted by the conveniences of city life. The washing was done in a galvanized tub, on a washboard whose legs were extended to accommodate her height. Wire clotheslines, strung between house and shed, billowed with sheets, towels and work-clothes and

plain, serviceable undergarments. The laundry, stiff and smelling of sun, received its finishing touches from a series of irons with interchangeable handles, used in succession as they heated on the woodstove. They were called "sad-irons," she couldn't tell me why, but I knew: "Grandma, they're called sad-irons because you feel 'sad' when you have to iron with them."

If my grandmother felt sad about any of her domestic travails, no one ever knew it. She sang as she went about her chores—"I Come to the Garden Alone," "Sweet Hour of Prayer," "The Old Rugged Cross," with an occasional secular addition, perhaps "Let Me Call You Sweetheart" or "A Bicycle Built for Two."

My grandmother's relationship with her Maker was solid and personal. Her Bible and Weymouth translation of the New Testament were limp with frequent use. She never missed her "quiet time" after lunch—a half-hour of meditation, scripture reading and prayer. Nighttime prayers were offered on her knees at bedside. She taught a women's Bible class at the Federated Church in Orland. She was respected as a teacher and counted many of her pupils as friends, though I doubt that in her entire lifetime she ever had a true chum: it would have been impossible to imagine her exchanging girlish confidences with a contemporary.

She made the bread, grew vegetables, killed chickens, churned butter, made cottage cheese. During sheep-shearing season she would feed ten or twelve around the kitchen table, three meals a day. She made her own clothes on a New Home treadle sewing machine. The preferred style had a slightly gored skirt ("easier to move around in, and not bulky,") and a wide collar with a bit of ruffle down the front ("I am so flat-chested"). The dresses were always of flowered cotton, purchased at J.C. Penney, the only department store in town, fifteen miles through the foothills, over a mostly dirt road. When the dresses were worn out, they were transmogrified into hot-pan holders, or given to the Ladies' Circle for quilting squares.

I was delivered into the arms of Jacquelin Chatfield Mallon at the age of nine months, and would call her "Mother" for the next several years. Her love for me was fierce, protective, and yearning, She was unique, and somehow frightening. To this day, I cannot tell you whether I loved her. She was the rock of my existence, my

disciplinarian, my conscience. Most simply put, she defined the boundaries of my child's world.

ATTIC WINDOW

By Jacquelin Aubin Ewing

The view from the attic window was not extraordinary. From it I could see down the slope of a gentle hill, leading to the road which connected the ranch with the main thoroughfare. There was never any through traffic, save for the rare driver who had lost his way in the unmarked, unpaved, dusty back roads of Tehama County. The ranch was the last stop. We lived, as my grandmother put it, "on the ragged edge of nowhere."

For the first seven years of my life I lived on the ranch, thousands of acres of ungenerous land on which my grandparents made a marginal living, raising sheep, a few dairy cattle, and alfalfa. There was love enough to go around, and time now and then stolen away from chores; my grandmother taught me to read before my fourth birthday—it was, without a doubt, her greatest gift to me. Still, I was a child whose life was inward-focused, solitary and dreamy.

The attic was reached by means of a narrow and perilous stairway. The heat, as I climbed up on a summer day, would probably be more than I could bear today—it was a place no one visited in winter. I recall no discomfort: memories of oppressive heat or cold seem to be blessedly brief. What I can bring to mind in an instant is the smell of the sun-baked wood of the old walls, the sight of the blistered, flaking paint on the window sill, the sound of the wasps who made their papier-mache houses in high corners where the roof and walls met. Do you realize that wasps end each hum with a question mark?

The attic window was not important for what I could see outside. It was indispensable to my activities inside. For, under the windowsill, illuminated by this small rectangle of daylight, was a large chest, and in that chest was the fuel for wonderful imaginings. There were beaded, dainty handbags, lined with silk so brittle with age that a clumsy child's hand would shred it. What family coquette had peeped over the rim of the faded Chinese fan—and who had chosen it, and where? Gold-

rimmed eyeglasses—so tiny, who could have worn them? They were in a hinged, stiff black leatherette case, lined in rich blue velvet. It pinched my fingers when it snapped shut. There were long cotton dresses, tucked and embroidered. Had they ever been white? Who had laundered them and, most of all, who had stood over an ironing board and pressed out the wrinkles with a series of sad-irons, heated on the wood stove?

Every *National Geographic* since the beginning of time was stacked in the attic. They were never thrown away, and never, never cut up for pictures. The maps, too, were sacred. I loved the *National Geographic*, but got impatient with the printed parts. The old copies of *Life* magazine, however, were my window on the world. There was glamour, drama, gritty reality. Every copy was there, right back to the one with Hoover Dam on the cover.

I was not encouraged to spend time in the attic. My grandmother would have much preferred that I play out-of-doors, and get "some roses in my cheeks," and help feed the chickens, or bring in kindling for the stove. So my attic visits were rare, and when I had settled myself amongst the treasures there I would be very quiet, and listen to the wasps, and smell the wood, and my child's imagination would visit the whole wide world, lit by one small window with flakes of paint on its sill.