In the New World

Ernest Hekkanen
Even then he seemed ancient, a mythical itinerant who arrived by train to spend the summer. What remains is a mosaic. A short man with large, enfolding hands who ate raw fish while I watched from the willow tree. A man whose single passion was to conquer, a joyless, stern, work-hardened man whose strange tongue I could not fathom.

Ensti Maallinen. He arrived in search of work in 1904 and how he found his way to southwestern Wyoming and the coal mines can only be guessed. Perhaps he was in the company of men who heard there was work in that land. Someone proffered the ticket, he paid currency he did not know the worth of and soon he was there, siderailed in a dry, hot country so unlike the swampland he had come from that he felt newly terrestrial.

A man who paid his dues. At midnight he would get up to cough phlegm from lungs riddled with coal dust. Embedded in his cheeks and forehead were specks of rock. He worked as a blacksmith, a man with a trade when he was not sinking charges in the mine. Then there was an explosion. A ceiling fell in. He was trapped seventy-eight hours underground in what became a grave for men whose luck had run out. A militant in his day, he was paid in full to the I. W. W. His last contribution was in 1929, and even now when the man no longer lives, the labour newspaper arrives in the mail to keep his ghost informed that the Union is still strong.

The tale. He fled eastern Finland rather than being recruited into the Russian army. He came to America where he worked hard, saved his money and married. He returned to Finland where two children were born and then, dissatisfied with his luck, where he lived in the city, in Helsinki, he came back with his family to the States, to Wyoming and the coal mines. The third child, my father, was the first Maallinen to be born in the new world.

In the family portrait my grandfather looks a handsome man. Doubtlessly strong. His hands rest like huge ornaments on his knees as he sits in the straightback chair with his family around him. Three children: a dark-haired girl, a tall, ungainly son and a tow-headed boy in knee britches. The wife, my grandmother. She had heavy, bovine features and the husky build of a peasant, but she was kind, you get that feeling. I never knew her. She died three days after I was born.
But the tale. He was an enterprising man and a good provider. Besides working in the mine he ran a small dairy and worked as a bartender in a saloon. It was said that he could use his massive fists if provoked and once he nearly beat a man to death. Or so the tale goes. I have the puukko he carried sheathed on his belt: a deadly, fine instrument that was honed to sting like a thistle.

That first trip to the Northwest. We picked him up at the railroad station in Seattle. He had one suitcase and a valise. And he was old. He seemed ancient, as though dust had permanently settled on his features. A stranger. I kept my distance. And he kept his.

"Call him vaari," my father said. "Grandpa."

My mother balked. She was an O'Connel. She had black, lustrous hair and needle features, and she didn't approve of her children fraternizing with the foreign and unfamiliar. I was two years younger than my sister and my brother was still riding my mother's hip. Her face became suspicious whenever Finnish was spoken in the house.

"What are they saying, mother?"

"It's idiot-talk. Don't listen. It doesn't mean anything."

My grandfather cleared the land. Cut trees and cleared the land. "I bring down light," he said. "Not enough light on this house."

The five acres. My father couldn't have made the down payment without my grandfather's help. Call it an advance against inheritance, anyway my grandfather had legitimate claim on the woods. He took over as though master. He determined which trees would fall and he would have fallen them outward to the horizons of the property had he not been pushing sixty. My father worked as a civil engineer in Seattle, he would leave the house early in the morning and arrive back late at night, in a '39 Plymouth we brush painted one summer to forestall rust. My father could devote little time to decimating the woods and, therefore, the woods survived, although sorely depleted.

But the woods. To my sister and me it seemed endless, thick forest. Bears came out of it to topple the garbage can, deer emerged to nibble at the garden and once there was a wolf. I can remember being roused to witness that gaunt apparition sitting in the snow looking into our windows. My father pitched food, but the wolf, an arrogant fellow, simply watched it drop in the snow. After sitting a while he got up and walked away, past the chicken house with the hens locked securely inside, along the path leading to a neighbor and forever out of our sight.

The house, a cottage. A pre-manufactured, easy-to-assemble
cracker box my father ordered through the catalogue. Friends gathered to raise it. The sections bolted together and in two days it was done, all except for tarpapering the roof. My father was laying the patio when I made my final thrust into the world. He will relive that moment with my mother. My mother was impatient to go because her water had broken, but my father, a meticulous man who sought perfection in small things, was determined to rake and smooth the concrete before it hardened.

It was to this outpost that my grandfather came with his traditions, his peculiarities and his foreign tongue. I can remember him climbing out of the car and stretching. The first thing he remarked was his fatigue and his need of a sauna. There was no sauna, my father informed him. But there was a tub. A tub would get you clean. My grandfather was indignant. A sauna must be built. The next day he started work on it. He was a good carpenter in addition to his other skills. He built the sauna to stand against time. A good, concrete floor on good hardpan. Walls with studs every sixteen inches. A firebox made of wrought iron, a metal ring to enclose rocks. When the sauna was done we dug two tremendous holes outside the door and filled them with sod and chicken manure before planting birch trees.

"For the future," my father translated. My mother would have nothing to do with the sauna. Only heathens went in for such practices. Only uncivilized people. Only Finns. She would continue to bathe in a tub, thank you. And so would the children.

"You're letting your blarney get the best of you," my father said. "That might be so, but I don't see how anyone can get clean soaking in his own sweat. The very idea of it sounds filthy."

"Anyway Lee will sauna with us," my father said. The dinner table became a battle ground, but in the end I would sauna with the men. Then, of course, there was the episode of the lie-fish. We drove into Seattle to the public market, an all day trip in the hot confines of a car, while my grandfather spat tobacco juice out the window. I remember food stalls, oranges piled high in beautiful pyramids and the barking of vendors. We went straight to the fish market. My grandfather tried to dicker with a man who wouldn't dicker, relying on my father to translate.

"A a. Too high, price too high." We walked away. My father removed his billfold and gave my grandfather several bills. We returned to the fish market. My grandfather waved his finger at the dry lie-fish hanging up-side-down in loops of twine. We bought what
seemed a cord of the stiff, board-like fish, parading it back to the car in our arms.

In this way my grandfather brought tradition to the dinner table. It was an involved route. First the lie-fish must be soaked, the water changed daily until the fish became pliable and the lie released. My mother refused to cooperate. She said the lie would eat holes in our stomachs. She sat with folded arms while my father prepared the meal. The fish became jelly that slid on our plates.

“"I can still taste the lie,"" my mother said, pleased that her suspicions had been borne out. “"I won’t let the children eat this. You two can rot your stomachs, but we’ll have sandwiches.”

My father translated. My grandfather raised his head to listen. He looked at my mother and grunted. He was a dedicated man at mealtimes. He attacked his food noisely, sucking in mouthfuls and releasing his satisfaction. I became afraid watching him, his appetite was so boundless and fierce.

Those days glitter now. The spangled mornings endured until late afternoon. I can picture the chicken house on the hill, the fenced in yard where the hens scratched. The tang of manure and lime pinches my nostrils. I carry buckets of feed and water and the chickens, anxious to be fed, form a red sea at my knees. I remember the rite of rolling heads and severed necks, and burying my hands in damp feathers while my mother singed the white bodies over flaming newspapers. And I can remember my grandfather keeping his distance, sitting at the picnic table, the sun at his back, methodically pawing at a raw salt-fish.

When we finished butchering the hens my father crossed the yard and sat down at the picnic table with my grandfather, while my mother scowled. Later I went with the men to the sauna. The heat choked me. I remained on the bottom step while my father sat with my grandfather on the top step conversing in Finn. I was the water boy, in this case a privilege. I liked making the steam that gushed against the ceiling and came floating down around us, erasing our visibility.

That summer with my grandfather ended with another car ride. I shook hands with him when he boarded the train and to this day I retain the impression of that monstrous hand taking mine into it. Several years later we drove to Wyoming to visit him in Superior. He was sixty-five and he was pitching old photographs into an incinerator in the backyard when we arrived. He had been pensioned.
and he was about to move to Florida. We drove him to Rock Springs to place flowers on his wife's grave, a last grand gesture before we put him on the train to the land of oranges and coconut palms.

Eventually we moved from the pre-fab cottage to a larger, more comfortable house designed by an architect. My father had become prosperous, and the city had encroached on our preserve. These were the days of angry chainsaws. Trees fell to make way for suburbs. Bulldozers and earth-movers leveled the land and contractors built houses, the basements of which flooded in the winter. Even now there is little beauty in these sub-divisions, although trees, deciduous trees, help to hide the thoughtlessness and the scars. I can remember fighting city children whenever I was called hick or farmer. We were no longer part of the community. The community was big and amorphous. Churches and gas stations vied for diminishing land, as did schools and shopping centres. And the forest retreated, leaving small stands here and there that first-comers clung to despite rising property taxes.

We learned by long distance that my grandfather had remarried. He drove an old Desoto all the way from Florida to show off the bride, a small, plump Finnish lady with delicate features and manners that contrasted sharply with my grandfather's. Her name was Helmi and she had a flair for making plump, round piglets out of clay. I was in high school and I was intolerant of older people. My grandfather spoke less English than he had ten years before and I coveted a secret disgust each time I saw his dentures soaking in a glass of water. His body had become fragile, after all, he was eighty-two. His joints had slowed his momentum and his face had become hollow, especially without his teeth. I was young and I was arrogant and I was proud of my physique, as he must have been in his youth. I was overhauling an old jalopy and to demonstrate my strength I hoisted the engine block in my bare hands.

"Someday make good blacksmith," he said, and for twenty minutes he rambled on in Finnish while I nodded dumbly, grinding my greasy fingers. I looked a young Irishman, curly, black hair, an up-turned nose. But in my body and my gestures I was his grandson. There was a tether as indefinable as time. I remember being impressed by his hands. There was no lack of strength in those meaty, thick, gnarled appendages. Mine would never measure up. They would never have such weight. They would never grasp the world as his had, in deep passageways in the earth.
But what am I trying to say? I grew up as he got older. He returned to Florida where he lived with his newly-taken wife. He lived in the midst of his garden, where grapefruit, lemons, oranges and coconut palms abounded, while the mood of the land got nasty. The time was the late sixties. I gave up my barbells in order to heft weighty ideals. While my grandfather grew old among his flowers. An old Wobbly puttering with his flowers, supported by Old Age pension, Black Lung pension, and Miner's pension. He frowned at the photograph of me with long hair, my father said. He disagreed with my flight north, an old Wobbly amid his flowers. And now it is 1977 and my grandfather is dead. I received the news yesterday by long distance. I will attend the funeral but first I must attend to this. The last years.

At ninety-four, when the Department of Motor Vehicles finally refused to grant him a license, when he was no longer able to take care of himself and his wife, who had become senile, my father brought him north by plane to Seattle and installed him in the tiny pre-fab cottage next door to the big house. For nearly three years the old people lived in those confines, the temperature kept at eighty-five because their bodies were weak and would not adjust to the colder climate.

"We give him pills," my father said. "For his lungs and for his lapses."

An old man with a hearing-aid stuck in his ear, which he kept turned off in order to silence his wife's voice. She spoke incessantly of going home. She could stand at the window and see across the country to Minnesota. "I must go home. Why don't you let me go? Why are you holding me? They won't like it if I don't get home for supper." My grandfather tuned out the deterioration of her mind. If brought to his attention he would say, using the male pronoun, "He's old. He doesn't know what he's saying." But she would out-live him, a young girl lost in her old age.

At ninety-four my grandfather had learned the worth of currency in the new world, and he had learned how to manipulate his children by promising to give or withhold. This began as an old man's mischievousness, but in the end it became paranoia, in the last years, when he could no longer feel secure in his sleep unless his bankbook was under his pillow. But he was old. The restraints were going, and thirty-five years in the mines, and the constant need to be frugal, had exaggerated his character.

I returned for a visit in 1976, allowed into the country because of a
legal loophole. It was spring and the occasion was my grandfather's birthday. His children were there and you could see by the furtive glances that they regarded one another with suspicion, especially the daughter, my aunt, whose dyed hair and sharp features were an eternal declaration of war. My uncle, an urbane man who spent his winters by the Mediterranean, living in pensiones, vacillated in an anguished sort of way. He did not require the inheritance but he was easily persuaded. And my father. With all deference to his ideals, his love of Emerson and Thoreau, he desired his father's blessing too much not to wish its reward.

Both my brother and sister had arrived with their spouses. We sat apart, drinking, exclaiming our virtues insofar as we were not vying for the old man's inheritance.

"I feel the money should be used to put the old people in a home," my sister said. "It's wearing mom and dad out taking care of them."

"You saw the way mother's hands shook." My brother had the mark of a Finn. He was blond and he had the large, thick nose of the Maallinen's, while I looked a story-book O'Connel.

I said, yes, they did appear tired, run-down. My mother's hair was white and my father's cheeks hung slack. But I had not been close to them for ten years. I had not witnessed their aging. In a way, it frightened me. I was made to feel my impermanence.

My grandfather had become a shriveled old man with a wren's face. His movements were ponderous and slow. But his hands. His hands were large and powerful, incongruous paws hanging from bony arms. I went up to shake hands, making myself heard with a shout. He clutched my hand as he spoke in Finn. His eyes were large and watery behind the bifocals.

"He wants to know if you remember helping him build the sauna?" my father translated. "You had one of those little tool sets. He tried to show you how to use the saw. You didn't want to be shown. Instead you told him you didn't like him and went back to the house. He says you were a stubborn register even then."

"Tell him I inherited that streak from him," I said, knowing he should be flattered on his ninety-seventh. But I had become cynical. I no longer toted ideals as much as I desired to be blameless.

The real celebration came a week later. My father and I went down to the woods to cut firewood. Later my grandfather, walking painfully slow with his cane, came to help us. He dragged branches and tossed them in a pile.
“He likes doing this,” my father said. “I’ll have to move the branches out from under the trees to burn them, but that doesn’t matter. The work makes him feel useful.”

I looked at my father, the thick, unhandsome face, the short, sturdy build. I looked at my grandfather, the manual labourer. You could see the legacy in our hands, the diminishing size from one generation to the next. We had come up from the mines.

We finished cutting firewood and climbed the hill to the house. I suggested we take a sauna. “Ensti might enjoy it,” I said. “The tradition. It will be passed on.”

My father cut the birch switches while I built the fire. My grandfather looked on with approval, clacking his dentures. It was a bright spring day, and warm, but he shivered on being undressed. He had almost no musculature and no fat. My father was heavy and carried a paunch. I had kept trim being on the road, working at seasonal jobs such as tossing hay. My father brought a bottle of whiskey from the house and we sat drinking while we bathed. Again I was the water boy. I made the steam that erased our visibility. Then we beat ourselves with the birch switches.

“I’m an old man,” my grandfather said. My father and I were dressing him. He cleared his throat and went on, “I haven’t much life. All, everything is gone. Pretty soon I die,” and then he spoke in Finn.

I waited for my father to translate. The way he firmed his face, I knew it was an emotional moment for him.

“He says it will make his passing easier knowing he has such a grandson. He can die happily, he says.”

“Tell him he has a lot of years left,” I said.

I learned that night that my father was going to put the five acres up for sale.

“We’ll keep the house, but we’ll give up the land. The taxes are too high.” He paused. “You know, it was really his land. I couldn’t have bought it without his help. I won’t tell him until the sale is confirmed. Perhaps by then — ”

“I understand you,” I said.

But I was thinking of myself, the fact that I was lost to motion, a Maallinen, whose very name was earthly, a man on the road in the new world.