

## SEBASTOPOL...1948

My Grandma sold the farm in Cotati and went to live in a little cottage on her best friends' property. We rented a chicken farm in Sebastopol out in the floodplain next to the Laguna de Santa Rosa stream. By now we were a farm family. My Mom helped the cow give birth, I helped with milking and feeding the pigs, my Dad bought & sold chickens. There was a schoolhouse about a mile & a half distant where I began first grade. It was a little building so every classroom doubled up. First & second, third & fourth...etc. they had a tetherball pole out back and a ring set...and then a baseball field.

Some wonderful things happened for me at that school. And some horrible . My teacher, Miss Turner, was a young woman who encouraged me to work ahead...I felt her friendship as being like that with my Aunt. She must have made me feel at home because early on there was a day that she asked all of us to name our favorite songs. I said "Meadowlands", the Soviet Red Army Choir's marching song. I hummed the melody for the class. A beautiful anthem...but no one knew it for some reason. Miss Turner had a little conference with my folks that night so they could let me know that certain things were to be kept secret. It occurred to me that I had seen my Mom turn several books in our bookcase around so the spines were facing the wall. Like a punishment for speaking out of turn in school. What did those books say? "FEAR , WAR, AND THE BOMB!" said one. "WAR OF THE CLASSES" said another. I guessed they were too *scary*. But I did understand that Soviet anthems were not really safe to sing at school. I understood it better one day when a kid who had overheard me say I was half Jewish, chased me down the steps throwing rocks and yelling "Dirty Jew".

Mt. Vernon School was decidedly rural. There were Floyd and Joel who were Okies. They had recently come into the county working on farms. They both had bowl haircuts, and Joel always wore blue overalls to class. Floyd was painfully shy. One day when I brought a new Kodak camera to school, he had to be held by two other kids so I could take his photo. Then there were some Pomo kids. And some Hispanic. And everyone was from little farms. We hiked to school, all ages.

Discipline came in the form of the principal's yardstick. One day a third-grader who seemed to dog at me in an awkward attempt to be friends grabbed me on the steps to make me do something. I refused and suddenly we were fighting wildly down the stairs thrashing and scratching at each other. Then we both felt a firm hand on our collars, and heard the principal's shout; "You two! STOP!" In the summary trial we had right then and there, she decided we were both at fault. I remained mute rather than blame the Third-grader. An hour later, she entered our classroom. She was a giantess in my eyes. A big strong-bodied severe-faced lady of the Old School, tapping her stick in her palm. They called me to the front. She said something about starting a fight, never again, etc. Then commanded me to put my hands out with palms up. Then she started wailing on them with the stick. I felt that I mustn't cry. I remember stifling it as hard as I could. The injustice of this pain was so intense to me that I had a child's sensation of "*I won't give you the satisfaction*" and held up the sobs until she released me. Then a slow walk back to my desk at the rear, with tears running down my cheeks. Kathleen broke the silence: "*Eric got a whipping*" That hurt me too. It seemed like a betrayal to state the obvious in a tone that made it a shameful moment rather than one of brutal injustice. The awed silence was much better.

I told my parents that night and they wanted to go into battle for me. But I convinced them to let it drop. I wanted it to be forgotten. The indirect benefit had been that Chuck was leaving me alone now. And that left me freer to visit with Sylvia and her best friend Rose. Sylvia was my crush this

year. She looked like an old painting, kind of reserved and sweet-faced with a blush in her cheeks. Her hair was curly and puffy in the wind, and she always wore a ribbon in it. She was very demure and our walking together was heightened romantically because of the tension of her shyness. It said to me that everything was special and charged.

In the center of the building was a tiny 'theater' with a stage. Here we had the little assemblies and here was the Christmas pageant. We watched a manger scene and heard some things from the Bible. Then there was a talent show. All I recall was the one thing that had us all hypnotized. The eighth-graders put up a scrim and backlit it brightly so they could perform in silhouette for us a drama in an operating room. They pretended that one of our classmates was terribly sick. Melanie Silva had a tummy-ache that got worse & worse. Then she was taken to the doctors and they said "*We'll have to operate!*" At this point I completely believed it. Then they operated and one doctor said "*This must be it: she had a clock in her belly!*" And he held up a big clock in silhouette. Wow! Then they pulled up some other junk from her belly like a scissors and a little garden tool. Oh my god. We first-graders were getting upset. I turned to one guy and said I didn't think it was possible to swallow a clock. He said: "*Well...that's why she's so sick!*" On the way out afterwards we were talking about what can you believe. I said I didn't really believe in Santa Claus, my parents told me they bought the presents. Other kids argued with me. Then we all conceded that the surgery was probably true. Kenny tried to tell us it was eighth-graders, but we felt certain that Melanie had been cured by timely intervention and that was an end to that.

## FARM DOG

At home I had lots of space to roam and as usual a full license to do so. We had a pig and a milk cow and another steer which was black and white and therefore named The Lone Ranger. We also had a succession of dogs. First came Julie, a sweet border collie that came with my dad & I to the dump one day and ran away. Then we got Tanner, a black Spaniel who was a great rat-killer and very playful. There was a point when my dad decided to tear down the little hut where we kept the chicken feed. He saw a rat and called Tanner over. Then he pried up the floor in one big lift and seven rats came speeding out. Tanner killed every one of them in a samurai display of lethal efficiency. He snapped at them with a back-breaking jaw twist, and hurled each one three or four feet into the air. The rats were darting and he was on them mercilessly. It was over in ten seconds. My father and I were completely amazed. Stunned beyond comment. A legend was forming around this deed right away. We told it in each our separate worlds. My Dad compared it to the "Seven at one Blow" story in Grimm, and then to the great deed of Skarphedin in the Njal Saga when he slides across the frozen Markarfljot slaying three at one blow. I told everyone at school about it. Tanner was my hero. Unfortunately he was killed by a car right in front of the house one day. Another horrible ending for a dog of mine. With Julie's disappearance, that made three dogs that I had just begun to love who were killed or ran away. It wasn't until recently that I reflected on my parents' negligence in each case. They just didn't care enough to guarantee that nothing would go wrong. A fenced yard, or a long chain or a longer search at the dump. I never blamed them then of course, I just felt that dog's lives were painfully short. But my next dog was a keeper. She was a German Shepherd/Collie mix and I named her "Guard"...I suppose with some hope that I had a big older sister now that would protect me. This was a real boy & dog love affair. The first time I experienced a dog tuning into me and looking for me in the morning and going along with games and ideas I would come up with. I would hike out into the back pasture with her, go through the fence to reach the stream and play hide & seek with her...or just cuddle up in one of the 'forts' I made out of crushed-down cat-tails.

## BULLFROG

In a way, that stream was my next-best friend. I spent most of my free time down there, poking around trying to catch things like crawdads and trout and frogs. When a friend came to visit, that was where I would take them. My first bad injury occurred in this way. Mattila was visiting and we went to the bridge over the stream to poke around. We heard the boom of a bullfrog and then spotted him. Rick went one way and I the other to try to get close enough to catch it. I slipped and fell against one of the concrete piers under the bridge, opening a gash in my forehead. It didn't hurt, so I got up. But when I put my arm to my head, my yellow sweatshirt came back down red! I touched it and felt the ragged edges of a gash... which triggered a hallucination. I floated above myself, and saw my head and that it was cleft by a ravine, a great canyon of split-open flesh. *Oh no, I'm dying...* is what I thought. Then Rick came up and got scared when he looked, and that scared me too. We stumbled up and staggered back to the farm where my Mom swept us up into the car and headed for the Cotati doctor. I was still not in pain, and I teased my Mom by arching my eyebrows so the cut opened up when she looked at it. She screamed. In the doctor's office, I was covered up except for the cut, and I could hear a snip snip. I said *who's cutting things*. My Mom was staggering by the door. The Dr. said he was *'cleaning up the cut'*...Oh. I was quiet after that. Until he was done; then the doctor tried to make light conversation with me, and out of the blue I told him this story, further swooning my Mom. *'My Dad put me in a contest for telling the difference between Scotch and Bourbon. He put a glass of each in front of me and told me I get a nickel if I guessed right. I did guess right!'* It was true. I'd had a few tastes in the past whenever my Dad was sitting with me and nursing a drink. I DID know the difference.

## CRAWDADS

Around that bridge was the best place to catch crawdads. Sometimes a friend would join me and we'd have a bucket to take a bunch home so my mother could cook them. I had learned a lot about the little lobsters. They were repulsive at first, but after some experience I had learned I was their master. Their weakness was their craving for meat. You could put any old thing, like a hot dog fragment, on a hook and they'd grab it with pincers. Then if you hoisted quickly to the bank, they wouldn't let go in time. Eventually I dispensed with the hook. Just tie something on a string. Then I realized that if I went down there without bait, I could make bait out of a crawdad. To get the first one I'd sneak up on them where they liked to bask in the shallow water on a warm day. The ones furthest up the bank would have their long antennae sticking up out of the water. I'd grab the "whiskers" as I called them, and fling one up the bank, then quickly stomp on its head. (gruesome, I know) Then tear off a little of the tail and tie it to a string. Crawdads don't care about cannibalism. You could go like that for a long while.

There was a great spectrum of crawdad age. You'd see little ones like shrimp. And then occasionally up would come a monster. Scare the hell out of me. The shell was much darker and more pebbly, and they were really big, like Pacific lobsters. I couldn't quite face those guys in hand-to-hand combat and they'd drop back in the pond while I hesitated. When we wanted a bucketful, I'd just grab them by their backsides out of reach of the pincers and throw them in the bucket live. Then at home we'd rinse them under the tap and then they'd get the lobster treatment, thrown in a boiling pot. Once, I was helping to clean them. I held the whiskers and put one under the cold water...and the whiskers were unusually short. The little guy revived and grabbed my finger with great force. He lacerated me good. I still have a scar from that encounter and a much better eye for relative lengths of whiskers & claws.

## TURTLE

One day fishing, I caught a turtle. There was huge weight on my line and I imagined a great fish...and was a little disappointed to see a turtle on the bank at last. But then I felt that pull that kids often feel

of interest in reptiles. They are so cool looking...and this one had come up from the murky deep. It was almost a foot across and my Dad was impressed. We got the hook out of its mouth without much damage, and then watched it walk around. I started to fall in love with the thing. I wanted it as a pet. My dad was good with that, he liked it too. So we took it back to the house with us and let it walk around in the yard. Then Guard came around and was TOO interested. She kept nosing it around, pawing it, wanting it to run I suppose. My dad could see this was not going to work...but at least for the one night we had to keep it. He decided to stake it in the yard to a long wire...drilled a hole in the rear of its shell and put a twenty-foot length of wire to it and to the stake. This seemed very clever to me. The turtle would still be "free" outside and could graze around and enjoy itself. But in the morning when I rushed out, the turtle was gone. We realized it had just pulled hard enough to break off that small piece of shell and go. It puzzled me ....I had definitely thought the feeling was mutual, that we were going to be buddies and that I was going to give the turtle a wonderful home. It somehow never occurred to me (nor my Dad?) that this was a definite water creature, a turtle, not a tortoise. It would rather die than be staked to someone's lawn.

### CARP

My most awesome catch in that 'lagoon' came on a festive day when the Mattilas visited and all of us went out fishing. I had a powerful bite, and the fish was far too heavy for me. The Dads took over and slowly reeled in something while fins occasionally broke water. Everyone with mouths open staring intently on the bank as a three-foot long carp was slowly hauled in. Yikes. This was a little too much for me. Not that it was scary...just bigger than my imagination could make to match up with the pond. A carp is a sluggish creature and this one just kind of sat there in the mud. Mattila's father who was a serious fisherman told us that carp was too bony to cook....so we pushed it back in the water. But then they all hoisted me as the all time champion fisherman of the lagoon. Nothing bigger would ever be caught there, everyone was sure.

### TUPPENCE

Walking to school was a long solitary stretch for me every morning. I gazed at everything, memorizing the little signposts. The spot where the little creeklet drained into the roadside gully. The big cottonwood, the right-angle turn after the long straight stretch. I have no memory of feeling that I was being mistreated. It was just... how it was. The walk to school.

One day a miracle happened on that monotonous hike. I was scanning the dirt ahead of me out of habit. Rock collecting had become interesting to me after being shown some agates in my grandmother's driveway stone. On this particular day I spotted a coin in the dust. Looked like any old penny. But when I picked it up I knew I had something special. It was bigger...and different. The date was 1866, and it was a two-cent piece. At six years old, there was no limit to what I could dream had just happened. I had found an ancient coin worth millions. When I got home, my parents were themselves a little keen to know how much it was worth. Some time passed before we found out...and it turned out to be a coin of little value...thirty cents. But that didn't really dampen my feeling. There was a sense of magic popping out of the very ordinary immediate fabric of my life that stayed with me. I had walked there a hundred times...and just this once my shoe scuffed it up and my eye fell on it. It wasn't valuable but I loved that coin. It was my best possession for years. An amulet.

## RACCOONS

Our chickens had an outdoor fenced yard next to the long chicken house. Older hens might stay out there late and we began to lose some to predators. We'd find a body down by the creek with its throat torn open and the blood drained. The losses kept happening and my Dad realized it was the work of raccoons. He was advised to hunt them down and a neighbor loaned us a .22 rifle. I was acutely interested in this whole crisis. The audacity of the raccoons impressed me. The slit throats and blood-sucking were pretty scary.

I also had a Western kid's fantasies about wild animals & rifles, so my father's role in this story became mythic after the gun entered the house. One morning my Dad woke me with urgency. Apparently the raccoons had wakened our dog in the middle of the night. He had gotten up, and with the gun & a flashlight, had run out to the coop in time to see the raccoons on a tree limb that overhung the yard. Using the flashlight on the barrel, he took shots at both and felled one. The other was wounded but came down the tree where it fought with Guard briefly and then escaped after slashing her up a little. He told me we had to go track the wounded one down.

I was astounded. The image of the encounter was (still is) blazingly vivid in my mind's eye. Then we went out & I saw the dead raccoon in the yard...it wasn't just a story. I felt a pang of regret...it looked so interesting. But then too I felt awe at my father's prowess in making that shot at night. And Guard! What bravery for her to sail in to the battle and get wounded. I was as stirred with the nobility and gravity of these events as it was possible for a 6 year old boy to be.

Next we followed the trail of blood-dripping back behind the chicken house into the meadow. The trail eventually led directly to the base of an old oak....and there were spots of blood on the trunk. Up about twelve feet there was a sizable hole in a dead part of the tree. We stared at it a while and then my Dad made a plan. He went back to the garage and got some kind of heating oil. Then I had to gather stones and he took six of them and wrapped them with rags and then tied string to make it a tight bundle. We went back out into the field with the rifle, & the rocks in a bucket of oil. When we got to a fence line just a little downwind of the tree, he gave me the rifle and told me to crouch down comfortably and take aim at the limb just below the hole in the tree. I owned a BB gun so I felt comfortable with the idea....but of course I had never fired a real rifle nor hunted a wild mammal. The responsibility entrusted to me was enormous in my heart. It was uplifting. I felt the honor of playing any part in a heroic saga. My dad explained what he was about to do. He would light a stone afire & then try to lob it into the hole. The raccoon would surely run out if it was still alive...and my job was to shoot it.

He went over right next to the tree and I settled into my sniper's position lining up the sights on the limb. I was utterly serious and had no doubt in my mind that I could make that shot. The first stone was lit, my dad's hand seemed to be on fire for a second and then he lobbed it like a grenade...right into the hole! First try, right in. I'll never forget the arc of that throw. I was watching it so keenly with all the wonder of the idea flaming in me as I saw the rock on fire. My father seemed like Hercules at that moment. Then he called out to me to be sharp and ready. We waited for long minutes frozen like that, waiting. Smoke came out of the hole. I kept thinking I could almost see the raccoon in the shadow ..but then nothing. After a long wait, we realized it wasn't coming out. My dad came over..."he's dead, Rick...he would have come out by now." A moment of disappointment as I relaxed off my aiming stance. I wasn't going to be the hero after all. My Dad was the hero, I was the apprentice hero. Then a rush of pride that I had, after all, stood my ground, manned my post. I had held the .22 and had been trusted with the killing.

Later we buried the raccoon that was in the yard, and I asked if I could make a hat out of the tail. We cut the tail off and my Dad slit it open and salted it. The whole story was epic by now and having a

tail would really ice it. But the epic took a turn for the ridiculous within the week. Our dog discovered the burial site and dug it up one day. She rolled in the carcass in that insane way that dogs enjoy, and then reeked intolerably. We washed her down several times, but it was still pungent with death. Then next day my father's string of great ideas ran out. He thought maybe he ought to give her a cologne to over-ride the putrescence. I think it was my mother's favorite, Chanel #5. This was a disaster. The cologne was able to vivify the carcass smell and then carry it more powerfully. And the mixture of those two odors was even more horrible. This part of the story threatened to overwhelm the great hunting saga amongst the grownups as time passed. But not for me.

## **PIGS**

We had a sow which we had bred, to sell off the piglets. This was a very big creature, especially to a six-year old. I liked her and she seemed to enjoy my presence. She was given the run of the back pasture, so I'd go out there and stand around her, maybe scratch her back a little. That strange roughness of a pig's hide seemed cozy to me...not like our cow's fur nor of course like Guard's...but somehow solid and warm and sort of humorous. Eventually she had a litter...14 piglets! It was wonderful to see them squiggling around... but a terrible thing started happening that changed my view of pigs forever. She rolled over and killed them. One or two every day for the first days. We lost seven piglets to her massiveness and insensitivity. It was awful...awful to see dead piglets who were so cute...but most awful to have to understand the seeming stupidity and gross neglect of such a creature. It wasn't a good feeling for someone who was closer to piglet size than sow. We had to watch over her much more closely and take the piglets away when she slept. Those seven did survive, and then came the real fun for me. After they gained their feet and got more agile, I loved to play with them. Picture a little boy running around under the oak trees chasing seven piglets. All of them dashing crazily and squealing in fun. Sometimes I'd catch one, and there would be a little tussle. They were like little brothers & sisters ...I felt certain that the play was mutual...except that unlike my dog, these guys did not like to cuddle or be held. It was tag or nothing.

## **DUCKS**

There were only a couple of kids on our road, both pretty far away. Doug was the one who was sort of a friend. He'd come over sometimes and we'd go down to the creek to play in our forts. The reeds and rushes could easily trample into little havens where we acted out stories and kept things. One day we noticed our new fort could look out onto a side channel of the Laguna and that some mallards were using it as a runway. They'd start their charge of hard flapping along the surface and then that slow ascent up out of the reeds past our fort's 'window'. We got the idea that we might be able to catch one of those ducks. It hit me that our chicken net might do the trick. I was pretty good at netting chickens in the yard. It was a six foot long pole with an end like a basketball hoop. We brought it out to the fort and waited. When the next mallard started down the channel, I poised the net over the water and then lunged out and dropped it over the duck just as it passed by. *Got it.* I hauled it in and we took the duck out by the legs just like we took chickens out. I handed it to Doug and then made another successful pounce on the next duck. This was really great, we had one duck each. I think I was aware that it was surprising to have succeeded two times in two tries. But my dad had hit that hole on his first flaming stone hadn't he? One expected these things.

We realized we had to do something with them now...so we went on home to our farms to put them in the chicken coops. Our chicken house had some fenced coops for just a couple of birds each, so I

put the duck in a vacant one. It seemed unhurt and not too upset. I brought it water and some grain, and went off to tell my exploit.

My dad's reaction was not quite what I had hoped for. He was impressed that I had done it, but there was something else in his voice. The else was: *what are you going to do now?* The next day he was talking to my mom so I could hear... about how good he thought roast wild duck was supposed to be. "*How do you suppose we should cook one of those?*" That kind of talk. I objected, and he asked me what I thought I was doing with it. It wasn't a pet, it was a wild animal. It shouldn't live in a cage.

By the afternoon, I was feeling pretty bad. I couldn't stand the idea of my green-headed prize being cooked like some stupid chicken...and I knew these people were quite capable of it, the chopping of the head, the plucking, the roasting...Then too there was that underlying message. In a way I heard my dad's intention. He was trying to jolt my awareness, to remind me what we learned from the turtle. What the hell DID I think I was doing with it? What was best for the mallard? This awareness ate at me until it broke something. I went by myself to the barn and went into the pen with a net. Caught the mallard and pulled him up into my chest while he strained against me. Then I went outside, talking to him. Just saying goodbye. I knew I needed to be forgiven, I needed him to be free and uninjured and not to hold a grudge. Out in the yard I stopped and faced the Laguna, holding the mallard by its legs, slowly raising it from my chest...and then with a "*goodbye!*" I pushed it out and let go.

The mallard flapped hard and awkwardly for a second and looked as if it would crash. It barely avoided the ground, trying with all its might, then slowly gained the air, a few feet at a time. I found myself mentally urging it on... praying? Little phrases were popping in my mind, *Fly! Go! Keep trying! Please!* In that next two seconds I was still feeling my Wrong, knowing that if he crashed I would be to blame. *Maybe he was injured when I caught him? Please!* The kind of moment when you know, even at six, that this means Everything. I know it now, fifty-seven years later, because every nanosecond is engraved in my mind. The mallard finally began to rise to twenty feet, but was headed right for an oak tree and to my eye seemed about to crash into it. But that long slow flight began to arch upward with acceleration and as I felt with all my heart a wish for it to clear the tree and reach the sky...it did. I was weeping. It was all a redemption arc to me, that beautiful climb out of captivity and my boyish sin.