

# Gathering the Clan at Grandma's Picnic

*Bruce P. Ballenger*



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I am the new husband of the daughter of a daughter and now I am expected to be seen at the annual August family picnic in Coventry. Grandma Pouliot, who presides over these events, grabs the back of my neck as I lean down to kiss her, and with a strength that surprises me, presses my cheek to hers.

It means, I think, that I am now considered a member of the tribe.

It is a big group, gathered there in the shade of beech and maple trees. Justine Pouliot, 86, had 13 children, most of them daughters, and every summer in late August many of them return to her small, white frame house on a quiet street in the Connecticut countryside. They bring barbecue food and beer and boyfriends and the new children who now extend the family further.

The new husbands and boyfriends eye one another sympathetically. We don't know one another's names, but nod in passing, aware that we are new initiates in this ritual of belonging. One day we may be invited to join the older men at the poker table under the tree at the far end of the yard.

But it is Grandma Pouliot's strong embrace when we arrive that makes me feel I belong here. And when she invites me to enter her house to look at the family pictures that cover the walls of every room, I search for our own wedding picture, expecting to find it easily.

"We did send it to her?" I ask my

wife, Karen. "I think so," she says.

We never do find it, though Karen assures me it's there on some unseen wall or shelf. I wander back out to the yard wishing I would be invited to join the poker game. It is a strange longing, because I dislike cards and am uneasy in the company of men and money.

I sit down on a lawn chair, and while I watch the smoke from barbecues drift through the trees, one of my wife's aunts tells me about the job prospects of each of her sons. She talks as if I know them all, and I pretend I do. As I listen, I think about my own family, small and splintered and living separate lives on both coasts, with a few cousins and uncles still lingering in Chicago, where I was born.

When I was young, we would sometimes gather at Thanksgiving or Christmas. But these family affairs became more sporadic and less joyful as I grew older. It wasn't bitterness that made us drift away from one

another, but apathy. We simply lost interest in one another's lives as they took on a meaning separate from family, and finally we became strangers to one another.

"Don't you think Grandma Pouliot looks pale?" Karen asks. "I've never seen her look so tired."

Grandma is stationed in a rocker lawn chair, being introduced to the new boyfriend of a daughter's daughter. I notice that even he leans down to kiss her before driving off loudly in his glossy blue pickup truck.

Everyone, coming and going, pays respects to Grandma Pouliot, and love for her softens the faces of even the toughest teenagers in the family.

I don't really know whether she looks especially tired or pale this day. But I do think she seems happy as she quietly scans the gathering that fills her yard. I tell Karen this, but I know it doesn't reassure her.

Several times I hear cousins in quiet conversation wonder whether these family picnics will continue after Grandma Pouliot is gone. I wonder too, knowing how easily family members can become strangers without something or someone to remind them of who they are.

I think Grandma Pouliot knows this too, which is why she still goes to every wedding, still remembers every birthday and still rises early every year before the family picnic to make two large chicken pot pies in her small white house full of pictures.

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