

Passings

by David Ackley

Perhaps my grandparents, Fred and Lela, when they were growing up in Cutler, Maine would more than once have seen the Roosevelt family, passing through by horse-drawn caliche to spend those more leisurely summer days sailing the waters off Campobello, these watching barefoot, towheaded Maine farm kids, tanned and shyly waving at the rich folks as they rode past in clouds of dust and horse-turd, straw-hatted, scarves flapping in the wind, and the ever gregarious Franklin, still a child himself, standing to wave wildly back. At the end of Franklin Roosevelt's life, my father, Harry, two years into his army career in 1945, stood in the Honor Guard for the passage of the president's casket on a train through Columbia, South Carolina. Later, with my mother, I watched the funeral cortege pass us in front of an Italian bakery in Washington, D.C. while I ate the first bread hot from the oven I had ever tasted. We must have been on our way to join Harry, and take-up the gypsy, army life that would be ours for the indefinite future. I was seven years old. Despite the war's distant carnage, I'd never known death directly, and Roosevelt's, whose voice was familiar even to me from his radio chats, was my first close brush with death and with history, which somehow fused in my mind. I felt that the man behind the dark windows of the hearse would no longer be able to taste the delicious bread. It was puzzling and unfair that he would be deprived forever of this pleasure, especially him, our shield against all the evil of the world. (Though I didn't know he had also declared the war that would change our family life forever, though my being there in Washington, having left home in Nashua on our way to join Harry, was a small eddy in the whole subterranean flow.) I had some notion to ask Dot whether what I was thinking was right—but I could not think my real question into words and held my buttery tongue.

