

Tim Clancy
Whithorn

The first time I spent a night away from home I was six-years old. My father had left me and my eight-year-old brother Mike with our grandparents to make things a bit easier for my mother, who would be occupied with a just-delivered baby, the sixth of what would become my ten siblings.

My grandparents' house was on Whithorn Street, in East Detroit. Like most of the houses in the neighborhood, theirs was a small two-story with a set of wood stairs rising to an open porch. Their tiny front lawn was lush and carefully manicured. Every house, in either direction, on both sides of the street had a concrete driveway that crossed a sidewalk as far as I could see.

I wasn't used to staying away from home, a five-acre farm on a dusty road near the town of New Hudson, Michigan, forty miles to the west. The front yard there was a weedy half-acre, bordered by a grove of fruit trees and a long dirt driveway. In this yard we could build forts and store treasures gathered from the surrounding fields and woods. Under a towering cedar that grew in the center of the yard, we would float through the air on a rope swing or find shade on a summer day.

My grandparents' yard was not for exploration nor was it a place to store treasures. It was too small and too tidy for such things. The backyard was just big enough for an apple tree, a clothesline, and vegetable garden. Somewhere there is a picture of my grandfather, barely smiling but clearly proud, holding the biggest carrot I've ever seen. Into the pot with the roast it would go.

When it was time to gather around their dining room table for a Sunday dinner, my grandfather, who grew up hearing and speaking Irish, would always say something that sounded like this: "Seck sheese n' guh har, mushuh duh hullyuh." *Sit down in the chair, love, if you please.* If we were getting underfoot or he wanted us to go outside, he'd raise his otherwise gently lilting voice and snap, "Fahguh bahlyuh." *Clear the way.* We didn't need a translation for that one. After dinner, he'd sit in the living room and smoke a cigar. Staring out from portraits on the wall behind him were images of JFK, the Pope, and Jesus.

"Thoon n' therus," he'd say. *Shut the door.*

My grandfather's given name was Patrick, but, to distinguish him from at least two other Patrick Clancys who lived in the same area of West Clare, Ireland, he was called Appie. My mother and all the in-laws called him that, but my father and his four adult siblings simply called him Daddy. All but the youngest were born on the dining room table in the house on Whithorn Street.

When she left her farm in County Cavan, my grandmother also left her given name, Bridget, a name she feared would brand her a poor working class Irish girl with few prospects. As an American, she would, instead, be called Beatrice. In 1913, she made her way to Detroit, where she met and

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married Appie. Many of their neighbors in East Detroit were Irish, but many more were Polish, German, and French Canadian.

One of my grandmother's brothers, Charles J. Rogers, had invested all his savings in a Mack truck, only to have it stolen, as the story goes, by "the mafia." Starting from scratch again, he eventually developed a fleet of trucks and earthmovers--all green and bearing his shamrock logo. During the post-war construction boom, he became one of the main builders of highways in Detroit. When I was a kid, he'd show up at the big annual family picnic, always arriving in a new Cadillac. "See that guy over there?" my grandfather would say. "He's a *mul-ti*-millionaire."

During an early visit to the house on Whithorn Street, I was in the basement when I looked up through the window and, against a clear blue sky, I saw only the legs of someone walking by on the driveway. I'd never been in a basement. Whose legs were those? And why were they on the roof? The floor of the basement was painted gray, and it was spotless, but, in the decades before, it had been a Sunday afternoon gathering place for Irish dancers and musicians, among them, Appie's father, Harry, a renowned flute player. The suburban Detroit neighborhood my family would eventually move to was full of kids who would often borrow their parents' tools and then lose them. So that we'd be sure to get ours back if one went missing, my grandfather took a wood burning tool and engraved the following words on our shovels and rakes: *Stolen from Clancys*.

The kitchen of the house on Whithorn Street was compact. A stainless steel formica-topped two-seater table sat next to a small window with a pull-down shade and lace curtains. A shelf on the wall above it housed my grandmother's small collection of pastel colored ceramic salt and pepper shakers, among them a pair of little televisions, a white chicken and a brown rooster, and two little toasters. I wanted desperately to see them up close, to hold them in my hands, but they were "just for looking."

Later in life I would hear that my grandmother's cooking was not so great; nonetheless, as a kid, I was always thankful for her big helpings of mashed potatoes and gravy, piles of roast beef or ham, and cake for desert. Once when she was filling in for my mother--who was having another baby--I watched my grandmother make spaghetti sauce. She chopped up some canned tomatoes, dumped them into a pot with a can of tomato paste, and then poured the heated contents onto a bowl of noodles. But I didn't care. I was not picky. I was, in fact, always hungry and usually the first to finish, at which time I'd ask those of my siblings who *were* picky, "You gonna eat the rest of that?"

If we were clamoring for something to do, my grandmother had a few things that she'd take out of a cupboard, like the Parchesi game, a deck of cards, or what she called her "cootherman box": a collection of old necklaces, bracelets, and broaches that we would paw through for a few minutes, pretending like we had discovered a pirate's treasure.

The time my brother Mike and I stayed at the house on Whithorn Street, my grandmother took us to a big department store called Tom's, where the main attraction for us was a huge pet section. Arrayed against the back wall in aquariums and cages were tropical fish, turtles, chameleons, parakeets, hamsters, rabbits, mice, guinea pigs, puppies, and kit-

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tens. We walked along a creaking wood floor, smelled a pungent blend of cedar bedding and animal waste. In the midst of this carnival of color and odor, we heard a very loud, very distinct, voice: it said, "Hi, Mike!" We stopped, dumfounded, looked around. And then we heard again: "Hi, Mike!"

"Look up there," my grandma said. Sitting on a perch above us, we saw a large black bird with orange-yellow stripes under its eyes. Somehow aware that we were staring at it, the bird cocked its head and, in a winning display of comic irony, loudly declared, "Birds can't talk!" Our eyes widened. This bird knew Mike's name. It talked like a human. We stood there staring, while the people around us seemed to disappear. And then the bird let out an ear-piercing wolf whistle, followed in quick succession by another "Birds-can't-talk!" Stunned, we looked to my grandmother for an explanation. She smiled and said, "That's a myna bird." Then we went to the snack bar at Tom's, and she bought us a hot dog.

Later that warm summer evening, while sitting on the front porch, the three of us played a whispering game. I had no idea at the time, though, that my grandma and Mike had been in cahoots beforehand. She started by saying, "Now we're going to play a game they call black magic. Tim, you look out from the porch, and tell me any one thing you see--but don't say it out loud. Whisper it in my ear so that Michael can't hear you."

I looked out across and a little ways down Whithorn Street and saw several parked cars. I carefully chose one of them and then whispered in my grandma's ear, "the brown and white car."

In a calm voice, she said, "Michael, what did Tim whisper in my ear?" She pointed across the street. "Was it the big tree right there?"

"No," Mike said. "It wasn't the big tree."

She paused. A spark of concern flitted through my mind: how could he know?

"Was it the statue of Mary over there?" she asked, pointing to a neighbor's front yard grotto.

This time, to emphasize his certainty, Mike shook his head and said, "No, it was not the statue of Mary." My heartbeat quickened.

They went back and forth like this a few more times, while I carefully watched and listened. Then she looked across and down Whithorn Street, and in that same calm voice, my grandma asked, "Is it that brown and white car over there?"

"Yes," Mike answered. "It is that brown and white car."

What? How in the world? I must have given it away, whispered it too loudly. Surely he couldn't read our minds. Could he?

We tried again, and Mike was right again. At first I was awestruck, incredulous, a little unnerved. But after a few more go-rounds, I was no longer content to let them toy with me. Mike had known the correct answer every time. But *how* did he know? My intuition told me that they had worked together to fool me, and I begged my grandmother to tell me the secret. But trusting that I was smart enough to figure it out on my own,

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she made me try again, this time paying close attention to *each* word in her questions. Did I hear a difference?

Aha! Yes, I did hear a difference! My confusion, delight, excitement--all of it had turned, as many things do, on just one little word.

The game ended abruptly when our attention was arrested by something nearly as incomprehensible--but every bit as thrilling--as mind reading or a talking bird. It started in the distance: muted, celestial bells, growing louder as it moved closer.

"What is it, grandma? What is that?"

"It's the ice cream man," she said. Mike and I looked at each other for some hint of where this was headed. We were utterly mystified. *The ice cream man?*

She snapped open a little change purse and handed us each a dime. "Go ahead. Go down to the street, and wait there until he comes."

Mike led the way, and the two of us scrambled for the curb, alive with anticipation. A few minutes later, a man dressed all in white took our money and handed us each a bar of chocolate-covered ice cream on a stick. Our hands trembling, we carefully removed the wrappers, took a bite, and fell into a dream-like reverie, slowly moving back up the stairs to the porch, where my grandmother waited. We sat with her a while, quietly enjoying the exquisite sweetness of her little gift. In the now dimming light of evening, we stared out at the street, watched people and cars go by. Soon the ice cream was gone and it was dark.

I don't remember where I slept that night or much else about our visit. But I can't forget the talking bird at Tom's Department Store, the salt and pepper shakers shaped like little toasters, the cherry-scented aroma of my grandfather's cigars, the spotless gray concrete floor of the basement, the perpetual ticking of the big wooden clock in the dining room, the jing jing jing of an ice cream truck rumbling slowly down Whithorn Street, where, on the porch of my grandparents' house, one summer night in 1960, my brother and I sat with my grandmother and played a whispering game.