

Rain on a Coffee Can

I was ten the night my Grandma Coyne showed me how to fall asleep. I don't remember where the rest of my family was or why she was at our house. I was alone in the bed I shared with my sister and after what seemed like hours of trying, I could not get to sleep. I called for help.

Grandma wasn't the babysitter type so if she was at our house it was probably for a visit with my Aunt Mary Anne who lived with her. Grandma spoke with a slur, a result of a stroke she had when I was younger. She was also hard of hearing so speaking or listening to her was a bit of a challenge.

Grandma made her way slowly up the stairs after I called and called and called for her. As she got closer to my room I heard the familiar clack of her dentures as she swallowed.

She turned the overhead light on just like my father, did whenever he caught us goofing off when we were supposed to be sleeping. The harsh flash of light sent our pupils scurrying and was an effective way of getting his point across.

No scurrying was necessary this time though, I was wide awake and waiting for the light. Grandma came over to my side of the bed and stood next to it. She didn't sit next to me like Mom did or take my hand.

"What's wrong?" she said.

"I can't sleep."

Grandma always had a tissue in her hand or stuffed into one of her sleeves. She used it to dab the corners or her mouth. I had a hunch the clacking sound was connected somehow. I wondered if she needed new dentures.

Grandma looked out the window. The kitchen light from the apartment across from our house made a patchwork square of light against the otherwise dark window. It was raining out, it had been all day. She left the room, and asked me to wait. Where was I going to go?

Grandma came shuffling back a few minutes later holding an empty blue Maxwell House coffee can. My mother kept a stash of empty cans in the small pantry my father made for her behind our basement door. Mom used them for grease cans. There was always one in our refrigerator, ready to chill the bacon fat from our Sunday family breakfast.

Grandma opened the window and turned the coffee can upside down and set it outside on the brick ledge. She waited and listened and then adjusted it until you could hear the clonk, clonk of rain hitting the hollow can.

She walked over to me and tucked my blanket and sheet tight around me.

"Lie still," she said. "Listen to the raindrops hitting the can. Count them."

She dabbed her mouth before kissing me on the cheek. She smelled like pressed powder, moth balls and baloney. She turned the off the light as she left.

I was asleep by the time my sister climbed into bed and threw her leg over me. I don't remember how many raindrops it took, just the sound and how easy it had been to surrender.

My father passed away a few years ago. During one of our last visits I told him that story. He was shocked I had a memory of his mother that was so sweet. A lifelong insomniac, my father could have used her kind words to comfort him to sleep.

As he had wished, my father was cremated. His ashes were sealed in a tin can stashed inside a decorative urn. Unlike the coffee can, it sat on the window sill of my mother's apartment making no noise at all.