

The Dumpmaster's Boy

By Tom Sheehan

Ears I had, and eyes, and I used them well. Before I walked by the group of men on the corner, bringing my grandfather's lunch to the city dump where he worked, I knew they'd be talking about me. Even at six years of age, in 1934, there were certainties. It was the time of day, before the sun was up straight. The way they lounged. Who they were. How their clothes hung on them the way visitors come from out of town or right from ships. It was the clatter of their voices, snappy as a swung bag of clothespins.

At times their teeth clicked a harmony. It could be measured. Ancient Irish men made noises that were music to my ears. My grandfather made music. He was Irish. One of them said one day, in a whisper I could hear, that my grandfather was sick. That's when I got the worry. Even at six years of age, there were certainties, and uncertainties, and the unknown. I had become a worrier.

"Oosh," or "Ach," they'd say as I walked by, or "Arrah" in the old tongue, their teeth clicking on briars, the old Irishmen gathered outside Clougherty's bar in the west end of Malden, Massachusetts. It was 1934, the Depression a living taste about us, Prohibition afoot, the things that rose with us at breakfast, what there was of it, and set with the absence of a late snack.

Clicking still, the men were as dark as the insides of that holy place behind them I hadn't been inside of yet, with jackets and pants that were harsh to the touch, and their dark gray caps sitting jaunty on their heads.

Squat pipes twirled smoke up under the brims, teeth-bitten, jaws set like anchors for those who were shaven, white-forested for those not. Any other place in the world they'd be sitting out front of a mine shaft or a gas works, far from home, "Ochone" keening from their lips, the grief. They'd be sitting on wooden boxes, milk crates, odd scrounged chairs, and Clougherty's a temple of mystery behind them, behind a dark, dark door.

Even short of my seventh birthday, I'd know the air around them even before I saw them. My nose would be up proper, testing. The coal-cut of gas slid over on its covering wing from the gas works back of Commercial Street. It is a smell lingering to this day, a smell that comes back, as though it's on reminder visits. I know it whenever gasoline is being pumped at a station or being spouted into a lawn mower. I know it when I see an old and odd coal car now and then

sitting like a fossil along little-used railroad tracks. I know it in the depths of an old cellar when coal dust, fine as crushed days telling of fieldstone and time, waits to be found by a nose like mine.

The smell was so strong it allowed the creation of games when I'd hold my breath, pretending the Kaiser's freeking men were after me with their bags of green-awful gas. I'd puff my cheeks, waiting for G-8 or Nippy or Bull Martin, my pulp heroes, to come to my rescue. My face would get brick red and my chest would heave against itself and behind my eyes I'd see the rotters with their gas bags knocking down the way from Highland Avenue or The Fellsway, coming at me. There were times when I could let Hell break loose.

The old Irishers' voices would bring me back, voices that later I would stamp as high-pitched Yeatsian tongue in poetic treble, bringing me a new music, hearing The Man on record, hearing it "in the deep heart's core," knowing the haunt of it forever.

"That's for sure Johnny Igoe's boy acarryin' his lunch to the dump. Now that's a good lad for his grandfather altogether, won't you know." Pipe smoke would rise, a hand held in half salute.

They were not knocking the dump. For too many of us at that time it was hardware store and haberdashery, all-around supplier of used goods. It had endless yield and my grandfather, dumpmaster, city employee, was the head picker. Johnny Igoe had first call, first dibs. All he had to do was point at something and it was his, the chair with only one leg missing, a still-shiny pot, a book with its cover nearly gone asunder, an iron fire engine or tin plane, the kind to keep.

As I passed the men, they'd be quiet a bit and let the smoke twirl up under their caps and their feet go still on the walkway. Amaze you they could, some of the older ones, who often played their shoes on the pavement like a soft shoe set, or a tambourine shushed and low. Some would nod their heads the way priests do when they look in your eye, heads cocked, or teachers my brother had at the school up on Pleasant Street; noses cocked, as if they knew everything there was to know on the face of the Earth.

I watched their eyes, their hands, their feet, when I went by them on my errand. So many messages could be picked out of the air, so much understood about the long stretch of time. Gold chains across their vests, anchored to hidden watches, clutched inward a dazzle of daylight or sunlight. Occasionally one of them would work the shiny chain in his fingers, twirling it, cutting the air in little loops, catching light rays, spilling seconds out of hours. Now and then a

watch went into that small circle, in disdain of the flight or the compound of hours, but noiseless, a sun around a fist, and, like the sun, silent in journey.

Someday I'd swing a watch or chain like that in small mechanics, the wrist pure and musical, time on the fly, sunlight all mine, or on its journey.

But then, entrusted to my hands, was the great sandwich in a line of great sandwiches, my grandfather Johnny Igoe's lunch of a day, two good fingers thick, and the bread crusty and thick, too. It was wrapped in brown paper and tied up in white string by my grandmother. Out of her oven that very morning the bread had come, six loaves so golden and gleaming a mouth'd water for an hour or more. Sometimes a whole day if she ever got cross with you for a poor deed, poor deed indeed. You could be begging for a block of butter to drop into the hot wrap of it.

Her black stove flung itself across the kitchen back wall. It snapped noises only chimneys could catch hold of, mysterious crackling noises, and an ultimate power that drove every one of us out of that room but her on any July or August day. She had her colors; the stains under her arms turned as dark as lakes, her hair white, the blue eyes deep as the ovens themselves. Only the back of her wrist would touch her brow, the gesture of relief that only comes to women, especially those who warm by the oven, their eyes closed in tiny relief, a look off into the distance before going back about their business.

Bake she was born for and bake she did, and having kids in her days, and giving off tarts and slabs of pies and tasty things thick and chewy with gobs of cinnamon in them. Sugar trailed in every corner of the house and a wonder the little things didn't carry off the whole house of it.

"Suck on your tooth when you're done, Thomas. You might get another day out of it," the laugh in her throat like the bells at Mass in the right hands.

She was different from my father's mother, Mary Elizabeth King Sheehan right out of Cork. There was an elegant thirty-year widow for you, tall and gracious, precise of language, with her little black widow's hat on her head and the shiny glasses on her nose and a bread roll or two in her pocketbook whenever she supped outside her Somerville home. Her pocketbook was always black. It always shone the light around it. A touch of new leather at her hands as if a bargain had just been made. At Ginn and Co. in Cambridge, she was a bookbinder, for more than sixty years eventually, and never baked a pie in her life it seems. Or baked bread. But she could wash your feet and scrub your back on a visit with her slender fingers and make you feel

new all over. And she knew history and got books with broken covers or those which were not yet bound, geographies and histories and once in a great while there'd be poems of Amergin or Columcille or Donnchadh Mor O'Dala or Dallan MacMore or Saint Ita or Saint Colman, about Saint Patrick and Eileen Aroon and Fionn and Saint Brendan and Diarmaid and Grainne and a host of kings afoot on the very land itself. Much of it told to me, of course, though I was a reader, according to my grandfather, long before some of his own children brought the pages home to comfort.

Grandma Igoe would stand beside that great stove or by the buffet in the front room where she stored her finished goods, the pies and tarts and cakes and cream puffs so elegant you could steal but for the threat of the Lord hanging in the air over you. Her jelly rolls were historic, mounded and rolled and sugared, the sweet red line twisting its marble pattern you could only see from the end view, gathering inward until it disappeared, the way it could disappear sure down that b'y's t'roat.

Buffet drawers were crammed with her baked goods, the big ones at the bottom and the small ones at the top, and the cubbyholes behind doors at each end. My grandfather said she baked every day of her last thirty years, the memory of hunger in the old country hanging its dark face at the head of the stairs, waiting to visit again.

"Jayzuz, bless the memory," he would say.

And I could hear her say, "Hunger," in that musical voice of hers, "'twill be a guest here if I ever once t'turn my back t'him."

Flour clung about her like weeds against a fence. It might have been atomized on her before the atomizer was thought of. Her arms were white with it, and her apron and the neck of her dress where her hands were always at work fixing herself as if something wasn't set right or she had an itch waiting on her. White was her hair, too, like snow left over from late March and April in the back yard. Yet patches of sweat, dark as plaster in a leaky ceiling, were squeezed under her arms and moved perilously on her large breasts. Sometimes, though I dared never tell her, but especially when she wore her blue dress, I'd pretend the patches of sweat were maps of parts of the world I wanted to visit, maps I'd seen in the Atlas at the library with my grandfather.

All of Russia came up, dark with its lakes and seas and strange names at the edges of oceans. The steamy Congo he told me about came also, plunked in the middle of Africa, with

rivers and hidden lakes, and creatures that ate up little people in a single bite. Once, from the first moment, a deep stain was Brazil, down there under my feet. The country kept growing and growing. It grew with the pies and the cakes and the six loaves of bread. All morning it grew and she never knew how big that country got, that it might grow so ponderous geography books would have to be done over and the globe itself would tip on its side and bring her down.

In the lunch package I carried was also a pint whiskey bottle, filled with coffee, dark and shoe-colored, crammed against the sandwich. The top of the bottle would be plugged with an old cork or a twist of paper grandma worked down in as she turned the bottle in her floury hands. Sometimes it was from an old Globe or Traveler or Transcript, or a page out of the Saturday Evening Post or from a copy of G-8 and His Battle Aces I'd already read, Nippy and Bull Martin done for that issue.

She always left a loop in the package's string so when my hand got tired of the lugging the package near all the way to the dump, I could slip a finger in the loop and swing it along with me, still safe for delivery.

Off to the Malden City Dump was I, not yet seven years old, the little caterer my grandfather would say, carrying his lunch. "As long as the weather is dacent," his only rule, and he'd raise one pointed finger over his head, taking the deep blessing of the Lord on its tip for all that were bound by such high appointment. That was as much anointment as ever I understood.

And my reward would come, once I got there. Once I got past Commercial Street and Medford Street and the factories that could spill people out of them some hours the way Fenway Park did at game's end.

Once I got past Mulcahy's Bar and my Uncle Johnny squinting out the back window at me with his burning eyes on the sandwich pack. Sticks they called him ever since he came back from France and The Big Stink as he called World War One. His legs still brought him a pain only the pint could cure. Crutches, more likely than not swiped from the Malden Hospital, were jammed up under his armpit. Foul air still held out in his chest from the freekin' Kaiser's gas. And his mouth always watering for one of grandma's sandwiches she only made for those in the work.

Once I got past the pub with no name out front but which I called Uncle Dermott's Place because he could be found there of an evening. Or a morning. Or an afternoon, with the sun out over Medford and still in the trees or splashing like ducks in the Mystic River. Or when his last

job was into its second or third day and his pain became too real to ignore.

A pair of uncles I had in them! War heroes from The Big Stink, carrying the pain yet. France and Germany never far away from them, their eyes dark, their cheeks high and thin, their wrists coming out of jacket sleeves thin as morning gruel.

Once I got past Dinty Mulligan's house with his white Chow bigger than his bark and mean as nails. Once past there, and all the other obstacles a boy had, I'd get my reward. I never thought that anyone would trouble me on my errand, like kidnapping or knocking me down and stealing the lunch, not Johnny Igoe's boy, not the dumpmaster's boy, not the boy with two uncles for heroes. Nobody would bother an Irish lad bringing lunch to the dumpmaster who never ate it, who gave it off to the drunks who crowded around him. They were the drunks who came every night to prop their cold feet up on the ring of his great monger's stove. They were the drunks whose hands went fishing in that brown package like birds' beaks did to suet in the backyard feeder, their skinny little hands with nails for fingers and wrists thin as death itself, and their eyes almost gone over. Some of them for sure also carried the pain of all of France as baggage.

Nobody in the world would hurt Johnny Igoe's boy. "A sharp eye, lad, a sharp eye is all you'll need, and a brain to match the work of it."

At the last, I'd hurry to see if he was still there, waiting for me as I crossed the railroad tracks after looking and listening both ways; to see if he was still sitting on his bench, alive, his pipe lit and smoking up under his gray cap, his back against the little house he made out of scraps. It was an elegant little house that could have saved lives in the old country, with a lean tin chimney sprouting out of the top like a Jack o' the Beanstalk thing. Now he leaned on it, waiting.

I'd catch the rich, ripe smell of the dump, dense as a bag over my head. Foul old stuff. Damp. Liquid stuff. Food gone bad. Old wet blankets falling apart. Horses in there someplace, perhaps pieces of them, their shit anyway from the milk barns and the milk companies, the manure coming to life again from Hood's and Whiting's delivery barns. Cluttered newspapers came thicker with water, ink blobbing in clumps, words going downhill like sundown. Squashes rotted to the last seed of hope. Plaster dust drowned in puddles, houses going away. Wood going so sour it would melt in your hands. Once a week, it seemed, a cat or dog was caught on the wrong side of life.

Proof of the senses were shared with my street comrades then, my friends who roamed alleys with me, who blindfolded could tell where they were if they had been there before. We knew alleys that could run right out from under our feet and go down a drain, alleys that wore continuous walls of sweat, even in winter, alleys that taught us what veneer meant even before the word came into our vocabulary. We knew family backyards because of their discards, what they threw out, in what quantity, in what kind of container. What was one family's poison, was the same to another family. And that was rot within the hour of being tossed out onto a pile of yesterday's leavings.

Smells, like those of the dump, were living things, were markers, were signposts. Paying attention was necessary, for we were survivors as well as scavengers.

The dump smell itself was a livable smell. It was compost. Things could grow in it, get green again. Not like the coal gas smell that cut down into you sharp as a knife in the hands of a wacky doctor or a charlatan. Not at all like the gas works, the way its smell penetrated everything, wall and roof and window, the church even and you on your knees and trying to get away from it, so that you swore black dust was sprouting things on you, and growing its own little meanness.

He'd be there, my grandfather, at last, not gone anywhere, not undone, waving across the dump. Here was the little man whose magical voice rang down the days, that leaped alleys and lanes and railroad tracks that came across the centuries from Italy and Greece and Denmark and other dark places. Those were the places he swore the horsemen of the Central Plains of Europe rode through on their long route to Ireland, to the last end of Europe itself.

And even from England, for all of the stories.

Whole poems came out of that man's mouth. Whole poems! Whole poems without a stumbling pause and never repeated until I might ask for one. That so many poems fit in such a small man was the end of amazement. He must have filled his arms and legs and the whole of his chest besides his white-haired head, with the poems. On he'd go, on and on, magic on top of magic, the Argo watery and wind-driven, the waves crashing on rocks, perhaps Beowulf about in the land, or Grendel, or The Red King or Righ Seamus (King James), or, all of a Saturday afternoon he'd give off Brian Merriman's The Midnight Court at the Feekle*, without a stop unless your eye began to blink and head nod and the fill coming on you sooner than counted on. (*Where fifty years later my mother and four of her daughters would stay over on

their visit with Mrs. Smith).

Oh, sometimes he was daft with a poem that took a long time to learn, and so easy with others that came with music right into them, like

The pale moon was rising above the green mountains,
The sun was declining beneath the blue sea,
When I stray'd with my love to the pure crystal fountain
That stands in the beautiful vale of Tralee.

She was lovely and fair as the rose of the summer,
Yet 'twas not her beauty alone that won me,
Oh, no, 'twas the truth in her eyes ever beaming
That made me love Mary, the Rose of Tralee.

About his eyes the crinkles would fair light up with Billy Mulchinock's poem, and he'd push me with his roughed hand as though words were being pressed into place for ever, his pipe chomped in his teeth. But then, when his eyes darkened, when his lips set like steel as though a curse was about to set out from them, I'd know a change was coming, as when he started Lament for the Death of Owen Roe O'Neill:

"Did they dare, did they dare, to slay Eoghan Ruadh O'Neill?"
"Yes, they slew with poison him they feared to meet with steel."
"May god wither up their hearts! May their blood cease to flow!
May they walk in living death, who poisoned Eoghan Ruadh!"

"Though it break my heart to hear, say again the bitter words."
"From Derry, against Cromwell, he marched to measure swords:
But weapon of the Sacsanach met him on his way,
And he died at Cloch Uachtar, upon Saint Leonard's day."

I never knew, of course, from one day to the next, who last had his ear, what sword

struck him, what knife still at stab from Roscommon, with its grief calling, whose words he last sang. Or if the words, the weight of the words, had brought him down. It was not the same game that came with the sweaty maps of my grandmother's blue dress. It was the worry of the little caterer.

Nearing him across the dump, I'd wave to him my joy. His cap would signal back a joy. Before I ran the last yards I'd look for the day's pickings, to pray for his little successes. And for the whole family. They'd be stacked at the near end of the dump where Goldberg's junk wagon could come in from the lane for the pick-up.

Iron and tin and pipes of all classes in one pile, pieces of stoves and car parts and unknown black objects as much mystery as Russia and all its lakes and rivers. Pots and pans came another mound of salvage, silvery and coppery and throwing off pieces of the sun on good days.

There'd be doubled-over and tripled-over sheets of lead from wrecks of houses and roofs and downed chimneys, roofing tar black as ever still clutching at edges old as scabs, thick now in their pressings as slabs from a pine. I'd think about grabbing off a few sheets and melting them and pouring the melt into the casting molds to make more lead soldiers. My lead soldiers stood as an army at home, by the hundreds, Kaiser's men and Doughboys and Tommies and Washington's sore troopers and some from a place called Balaclava in their giddy uniforms.

The army of soldiers was in the cellar near the coal bin where Uncle Lew's beer can hung on a nail because grandma wouldn't let him drink upstairs in the house proper.

My grandmother would say, "You'll not drink up here, Lewis, the day of any day, and the b'y needs more sojers like I need a hole in me head," but grandfather would smile and wink a soft wink she daren't see even if she did, and we'd have more soldiers coming from clumps of lead he'd bring home another day.

Sojers. But not Lewis drinking in the house proper. Or Uncle Johnny or Uncle Dermott or Uncle Tim or Uncle Tom.

Alongside the pile of pots and things tin and iron, and brassy bits, shining like bits of gold, knockers and hinges and old bells with a dacent sound still lodged in them, would be a pile of rags he'd already have been through searching for sweaters and jackets and pants and towels and dresses and things worn whose names I didn't know.

The good things!

The good things would be set aside again, and I'd get my choice of a pair of pants or a shirt or a sweater or a belt I'd have to cut down to my size and use a nail to drive new holes in. And now and then, like a family store, there'd be a pair of boots for me. Once I found a new jackknife still in the boot pocket, the little leather scabbard my right hand could drop to and touch, the laces of real rawhide and near to the knee. His eyes twinkled and he nodded and said, "For me little caterer."

The good things would be brought home and doled out, the dole coming over on the ship I understood, sometimes to family and sometimes to neighbors, and not a sneer or a twisted head or a frown, and a proud boy or girl would look lovely in a new dress or a jacket or a pair of pants that Johnny Igoe had rescued from oblivion. A boy in an old worn green shirt forever would be one day in a blue or red one and which had come from the Malden City Dump at the hands of Johnny Igoe who'd not let the world go to waste or anything in it.

The Dumpmaster. My grandfather.

I wondered then, more often than not, how long would such a man live, carrying the weight of all his words.

It wasn't going to be forever, though you couldn't tell me so.

But that was my worry all the while.

He hung on until he was ninety-five, through one of his wars and four of ours.

I never knew until much later that the words were heavy, but the poems were not, except the one poem of his own, and the lines:

Though adopted by Columbia

I am Erin's faithful child.

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