The Windswept Journal

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Tick Tock

I stood in an antique store last week and had one of those moments where the world gets quiet and grinds to a halt and your mind is sucked through a cosmic drain hole into the past. There, high on a shelf stood an old pendulum clock, just like the one my father refurbished fifty years ago and placed on the mantel in our living room. That was shortly after his doctor told him to lighten up and get a hobby. What he really needed was Prozac, but I guess it hadn't been invented yet.

Dad would be the first person in his family to "take up a hobby," other than alcohol, for which his brothers had gained some local notoriety. My father didn't drink very often and he was sure to choose a more edifying pursuit than hanging around the neighborhood beer joint. But as the uneducated fifth child of seven produced by Irish parents, he was reluctant to appear original. Still, he was well read for a working man of his time and had always wanted to own a telescope.

Dad wasn't simply looking for an antidote to boredom. He sought to calm his troubled spirit and take his focus away from the sour fruit life was serving up to him. A clock seemingly wound at birth ticked on through his middle years and alarms were going off signaling a chorus of worries that left him upset and depressed. There was trouble on his job as he approached age fifty. The newspaper where he worked went through confusing changes in ownership and management. Doubts about his long held Catholic faith assailed him. And although he never mentioned anything remotely related to the bedroom, I'm sure challenges lay there as he matured. He also faced the difficulties of bringing up three spirited sons. And old wounds from childhood stalked him, events I never knew about until he became a talkative old man. I had only known him for sixteen years, of course, but I never saw him worry so much about every little bump in the road of his life. Even his choice of a hobby would result in an incident I'd remember for a long time.

"What would you like to do, Ed?," my mother asked him one night as the three of us sat in the kitchen and I worked on my homework.

"I'd like to build an astronomical observatory in our attic, Grace," he replied. "I'll rebuild the roof with cables and gears so I can crank it open at night to see the entire Milky Way. I can sit up there till dawn and do important research. Maybe the nature of the universe will be revealed to me through the stars. Maybe I'll discover a new comet and my depression will lift."

Hiding her frustration, my mother didn't ask him if he was crazy as well as depressed.

Instead, she said, "What about your job, Ed?"

"OK," said my father, "half the night then, and I'll point the telescope out a window."

I smiled at this exchange and thought maybe his mood had lifted and his funny side was returning. But when I looked up from my homework and saw the pain on his face, I realized he was getting desperate.

"Cousin Gene," said my mother "has a wonderful hobby fixing clocks. You're handy, Ed, and Gene said he has an old clock and parts to get you started."

Cousin Gene had married into my late grandfather's Church of England family. After Grandpa died and my grandmother came to live with us, she became more interested in Gramp's relatives. Grandma liked nothing better than to visit Gene's large clan and re-live memories of her fifty-three years with Grandpa in conversations with Aunt Mary and the others. Gene himself was not an attraction on such visits. None of us cared much for the man.

He was a little man in more ways than stature and his extended family was packed into an old Victorian house twenty miles down the Mohawk River in the small city of Ilion, home to a rifle factory that had been declining since the end of the war. His wife Mary and children, as well as grand children and a few assorted cousins and aunts, lived out a life that rivaled a soap opera. During

even a short visit, one drama or another might unfold before your very eyes, whether it was daughter Amelia and her husband Young Delbert making up after an argument and getting caught in the pantry, or Aunt Mildred telling your fortune by reading the sole of your shoe when you crossed your legs. My mother jokingly said the entire cast was an acting troupe. My younger brother Jesse had other ideas.

"I think they're spies," he said, "sneaking up on the Space Program."

"Ilion has a Space Program?" I asked.

"Well," he said, "the rifle factory might be making missiles."

"I don't think so, Jesse."

"Think about it," he persisted. "Ilion is the last place any Commie would expect to find an interplanetary missile base."

Jesse used the words Commie and Interplanetary often that year. His fifth grade nun sent home a note requesting he cease referring to God as the Interplanetary Being.

The next Sunday afternoon we all piled into the old Ford and set out for Ilion, Mom and Dad, Grandma, my little brother Jesse and myself. That was all of us at home except for my older brother, who was then disappearing quite often when family functions came up. Unlike me, Bert never argued with Mom and Dad about any of their commands or direct orders. He would leave before they were uttered. I, on the other hand, would whine and carry on about what was right and just and equitable, thereby inflating a simple parental request into a major court case. But Bert was simply there one moment and neatly gone the next. It was as though a master filmmaker had cut him out of the scene with a clean slice of a razor blade.

It didn't bother me that Bert wouldn't be coming with us. There would be no argument about which teenage son was going to drive. So with my shirt collar rolled up in imitation of James Dean and my left arm hanging out the window in a Brando-like pose, I drove out of our driveway with an enviable teenage style designed to impress any young woman who might be seriously lacking discernment. Who knew there were so many!

As we pulled out on the James Street I managed to roll our right rear tire over the curbstone. Grandma's head hit the ceiling of the car as the tire slammed back down on the road and Mom almost ate her cigarette. Jesse made the most of it, of course, gleefully bouncing all over the back seat in imitation of an airplane crash. I could hear my father's grunt of disapproval.

"Do you know how much tires cost?" he asked.

"I'll pay for any damages," I said, much too flippantly.

"You don't have any money," said Dad witheringly, like a tire losing air.

As things calmed down in the back seat and my mother lit another Pall Mall, Dad began to reel off suggestions to me: I should use the blinker, reduce my speed, pull my arm in and roll up the window so the wind didn't knock Grandma's hat off. Small chance of that … I had just hammered it down on her head when I came off the curb.

At sixteen I chafed against my father's control and there wasn't much he could say or do I wouldn't argue with. My smart mouth led to many confrontations and when his mood darkened he became more autocratic, heating the space between us to a high emotional level. As his depression deepened that summer, our egos were constantly banging up against each other. He had exploded and walloped me for my insolence a month before. Dad seldom hit me, and that would be the last time. I turned on him and put up my fists. Although he could have wiped the floor with me he backed off, rather than have a knock-down fist fight with his son. When he turned and walked away, it was as if he had given up on me, even abandoned me. I felt peculiarly alone and angry. The small victory of defending myself turned sour. Instead of pride, I came away with an odd smoldering hate for him that only a son recognizes and only a son gets over.

But on the ride to Ilion that afternoon, I decided to give the poor guy a break and not argue with his driving suggestions. Jesse sat in back squirming around between Mom and Grandma, who he called "the womenfolk," while he kept an eye out for highwaymen and spies along the road. The eleven year old carried a small derringer cap pistol in his pocket and was known to pull it out and start shooting at the most inappropriate times. He'd almost turned our baby cousin's baptism ceremony into chaos when a kid from school he didn't like showed up in church. But Dad was quicker on the draw as he quietly silenced Jesse's gun arm with a pincer-like grip that left the boy sore for the rest of the day. Too bad my father had not been present to save a quartet of Jehovah's Witnesses on our front porch the

previous week. But it was probably fortunate that Dad had missed Jesse's shootout with Mr. Lynch, the mailman. Jesse made him a regular target until one afternoon the big Irishman pulled out a starter pistol loaded with real blanks and shot Jesse at point blank range. Mom was livid to see her youngest son shot by a government servant, but later when Mr. Lynch came up the street Jesse ran to hide in the cellar and the U.S. Mail courier was no longer stayed from the swift completion of his appointed rounds.

I shouldn't pick on Jesse. I wasn't my father's pride and joy either, especially as I grew older. While I often thought him overly scrupulous as he followed a virtuous road, my moral compass was often askew. There were times I could not have found a righteous path had it been a line drawn down the sidewalk with yellow paint.

I often embarrassed my father when he was nice enough to take me somewhere. The summer before he insisted on transporting me to the hospital when I gouged out a piece of my hand performing what turned out to be an experimental flight on my bicycle down the city's ski slope. I came home with blood all over me and asked for bus fare to get to the emergency room. I told him I didn't need to have my daddy with me, but he rushed me over to Faxton Hospital and ignored my demand for him to wait in the car while I got stitched up. He may have later wished he had. When the surly nurse asked me to drop my pants for a tetanus shot, I asked if her husband knew what she did for a living. She railed at my father for allowing me out in decent company.

The ride to Ilion was over too soon for me, but none to soon for my father. Gene waited for us on his front porch, then scampered down the steps and began talking the moment we arrived. He was still talking later when we were leaving … sooner than I thought, as it turned out. He was a round chatty little fellow and had twice won the annual speaking award at the Ilion Toastmaster's Tournament of Talk. Gene made a living in the insurance business. But how he was able to fill out his paperwork was a mystery, because he had very poor eyesight. Working on his clocks, he always used a large rectangular magnifying glass. He kept it stuffed in his pants pocket and would pull it out and raise the glass close to his eyes. Working on clocks with one hand while the other held the thick glass must have been a challenge.

Gene was quite fond of himself, uppity and a financial know-it-all. If he wasn't talking about money, a subject that pained my father who had little, Gene would speak of foreign shores he had visited as a child and young man. Grandma didn't believe any of it, and guessed that he was embellishing his war experiences. He said he'd been to a dozen countries in Europe, but all he ever talked about were a few towns in Normandy. Outwardly a back slapper, he was a victim of his own suppressed anger and he often insulted my father in a backhanded manner. Gene and my father were different in many ways. The little man had a year of college under his belt and Dad had reached only the 8th grade. My father came from a poor Irish tribe, and Cousin Gene from a Protestant family of substance.

Gene often made the most outlandish statements and I remember watching my father's reaction the time he said something to Dad about his "dumb Irish ancestors." On another visit he referred to "that Nazi Pope of yours." He would slide such phrases into his patter and quickly move on, so that anyone would have to stop him and start an argument if they wanted to object to his words. He counted on the other person's civility to not do so.

Dad was not timid, but he was a gentleman. And he must have realized that were he to answer the man in kind, our social relationship would be over. Grandma would lose the opportunity to visit the only other family she had. I think Gene probably knew that; it was part of his calculation to remain in charge.

Gene had set aside an old clock for my father to begin restoring. He brought it into the dining room and set it on the table. To me, all the little steel and brass parts looked like someone had taken apart a set of automobile brakes and thrown all the pieces into a cardboard box. I could almost sense my father's back stiffen. He looked at Gene.

"Are all the parts in there?" Dad asked, with only slight sarcasm edging his voice.

"Yes, sir," Gene replied. "But before you restore it, you'll need some lessons in clock repair."

"Uh huh," said Dad. My father worked on newspaper presses and was quite mechanically inclined. What he didn't know about clocks he could certainly figure out.

"Sort of like an apprenticeship, Ed," said Gene.

"All in one afternoon?" said Dad. I could hear the anger building in his voice. I don't know how Gene used the word "apprentice" in his line of work, but in my father's it meant the lowest of low, a real dummy. If Gene had been able to see better, he might have noticed my father's neck turning red.

"Oh, more than an afternoon!" said Gene. "You can come here Sunday afternoons and work with me in the basement for a couple of months. I'll start you off cleaning a lot of old pieces I've been meaning to get to." Gene chuckled to dull the barb on the arrow he was about to deliver.

"Even an Irishman," he said, "should be able to handle that, Ed."

My father did not deserve insult. He had grown up in neither wealth nor privilege. He had slept with three brothers carefully arranged cross-wise on a double bed in a decrepit old rented house, dreading his father coming home and falling down drunk in the doorway in the early morning hours. His mother sent the boys and their two sisters out looking for the old man on payday, hoping to find him before the money was spent on alcohol. The coal always ran out before the next payday, and on winter nights Ma and her brood huddled together around a kitchen stove into which they put anything that would burn. Dad remembered seeing the large crack on the side of the stove shine out with hot light when an old newspaper flamed up for a minute, the tiny bit of extra heat providing a few moments relief from the cold. Home life was synonymous with hunger and violence, with broken furniture and sometimes broken bones. As a teenager, my father watched his mother die at a young age from poverty, coughing up blood and staining the kitchen table cloth that was all he had to clean her face.

At sixteen Dad left home and found menial work as the Great Depression began to spread across the country. He saved and proudly bought himself tools and workman's clothing and then found a better job. He thrust aside his self doubt, accepting without question the authority of employers, churchmen and older friends who helped him to reach his goals. He entered an apprentice program and acquired his trade. He learned honesty and loyalty and to trust in himself. He built a good life and married a sweet girl who had promised to love him for the rest of her days. He loved his church, his two sisters, his wife and sons.

But suddenly in mid life his confidence was slipping. Fears beset him. Something he could not fathom began to creep up from below. Anger plagued him, brewing up in the morning when he awoke from a restless night and simmering through the day, leaving him sensitive and resentful. By nightfall his emotions were spent and his soul was a cold stone. Terrors came back to visit him from a time when he had buried them deep within to quiet himself and get on with the job of becoming a man and living honorably with others. Then in his late forties, a ticking clock deep in his soul went off. It was time for him to deal with the snakes in his basement. My father eventually came to face the nightmare of his childhood and the other demons of mid life, but on that afternoon in Ilion, he was just beginning the journey. He was desperately trying to hold himself together and to make sense of his life. The awful gnawing in his gut that had been his constant companion for the past few months was making him sick. And across the table from him stood this little Protestant prick who wouldn't know decent manners from a stick up his ass.

From upstairs came thumping sounds and I guessed that would be Amelia and Young Delbert. Out in the kitchen, the women busied themselves with lunch, their laughing voices carrying through the door to the three of us as we stood around the dark oak table. Dad was opposite me with his back to the kitchen. He raised his eyes from the box of parts and let his gaze wander over to the window and then through the glass into the distance, as if he was looking somewhere for strength. Or counting to ten.

Quickly, he brought his eyes back and looked down again at the box. His mouth twisted into a hard line and he looked like he was about to explode. I began to fear he would pick up the little man and throw him through the window.

Cousin Gene may have been nearly blind, but he wasn't deaf to the silence pervading the dining room. Even Amelia and Young Delbert could no longer be heard upstairs. The chatter of the women dribbled to a stop as the silence blared out from us into the kitchen, and in a moment the entire house was as quiet as a tomb, except for the macaroni bubbling to a boil on the stove.

"Ed …?" I heard my mother call. She did not get an answer.

"Well, Ed," Gene finally began. "Perhaps we ….

"I thank you for the clock, Gene." said my father. "But I'm afraid we have to get back home sooner than we planned."

"Oh, now" said Gene, "there's no need to …."

"I'm not feeling well," said Dad. "We're leaving."

We were in the driveway and loading ourselves into the car less than a minute later. I said nothing at first. I was surprised my mother or grandmother offered no comments. Women often try to fix what is not ready to be fixed.

Dad carried the box of parts to the car. He got in the passenger side, a signal for me to drive, and sat staring straight ahead, the box planted on his lap.

Gene fluttered around outside the car like a small bird, offering one comment or another to each of us as I started the engine. Dad avoided eye contact with him, but nodded his head when Gene said he hoped my father would feel better soon. Dad appeared as agreeable as a muzzled bull. Anger welled up inside me and I wanted to tell Gene off.

When the little man danced around to my side of the car, I looked up at him and spoke with anger written across my face.

"Let me just say on behalf of our family …."

An iron clamp seized my right elbow and squeezed so hard I almost fainted.

"Uh," I said through clenched teeth, "thank you and good bye." My father let go and I slumped in my seat. Under his breath Dad said with a fury, "Don't ever speak for me."

I put the car in reverse and backed out of the driveway a bit too fast, scraping the bumper on the pavement when we hit the street.

No one uttered a word as we drove up the road toward home. Near Frankfort, my father asked me to pull over near a railroad siding.

I expected him to heave the box of parts out the window and tell me to drive on. But instead, he got out, placed the box on the seat and walked 30 feet or so into the grass. He knelt down and threw up.

Small womanly nurturing sounds came from the back seat, but neither my mother nor grandmother got out to attend my father. That told me they understood what was going on. I can't say I did, not fully. I turned to the back seat and said, "Gee, he really ***was*** sick!" No one answered.

In a few moments Dad returned and told me to drive on. Two or three miles went by without a word being said by anyone. Finally, I could take it no longer.

"Are you feeling better?" I asked.

"Yes," was all he said.

"Maybe I can help you with the clock," I said. "I mean clean the parts or something while you figure out how they go together."

"Don't worry about it, " he said curtly. The brusque manner hurt. While I thought nothing of dismissing him when I wanted to, I didn't like him dismissing me.

Just to be mean, I said, "I suppose you never worry about anything."

There was a moment of dead silence while I waited for him to reply, knowing I'd hit him where it hurt.

"Well," he said slowly, "I guess you could say I've been worrying about everything."

I felt horrible, and I didn't want my father to bare his soul to me. At that age, it would have been too frightening.

That night he telephoned Gene and apologized, something I thought was totally unnecessary, but a sixteen year old knows nothing about when to apologize.

Over the next few weeks, Dad was at his tiny workbench in the cellar after supper each night and worked on the clock while the rest of us sat in the living room and watched television. He had it together and cleaned up in no time. He sanded the wooden case and gave it three coats of varnish. When the last coat was absolutely dry, he brought the clock upstairs and placed it on the mantel in the living room, arriving in the middle of a commercial break during Gunsmoke. The clock was wound, the hands set to the correct time and the pendulum given a tiny shove. The clock went tick, tock. Tick, tock. It was rather loud. Kitty was saying something to Doc just inside the swinging doors of her cowboy bar. Jesse rose from the couch and turned up the volume on the TV set.

"Ed," said my mother warmly, "why don't you wait and start the clock after the news, before we go to bed."

Dad arrested the pendulum in mid flight.

When Jesse and I settled in our beds for the night, we heard Dad start up the clock again in the living room. Tick, tock. It seemed even louder than before. Perhaps the clock came from a large mansion where it had been placed far away from the bedrooms.

"I can't sleep," Jesse moaned from across the room. "Go tell Dad to stop the clock."

“You go tell him,” I said. “Threaten him with your cap gun,” I added sarcastically.

“But you’re the family spokesman,” he whined in a sing-song voice.

I let his derision pass.

After a few minutes he said, “Why did Dad get mad and want to leave?”

“You knew he wasn’t really sick?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said, “I can tell when he’s upset. Everything gets quiet.”

“Dad is dealing with a lot of things, Jesse,” I said.

“Uh-huh,” he said. “Especially ***you***.”

He probably said it in fun or just to rile me. But a rage suddenly erupted inside me, whether from guilt or hormones, one never knew at that age. The anger that had simmered since we left Gene’s would be directed at whoever nudged it. I leapt out of bed and flew across the room, caught my brother up by his t-shirt and slugged him in the shoulder. I slugged him again … somewhere … as he tried to wriggle away from me up against the wall. And then Jesse did something he’d never attempted before. He turned on me and punched me in the face.

Astonished, I straightened up, wondering what to do. He was still small enough to pick up and throw across the room. I stood there in my t-shirt and boxer shorts and suddenly saw me as my father, and my rage turned to fear. I thought then it was the fear of losing control of myself. But today I realize it was much deeper. It was the fear of losing control over someone else.

“What the hell are you talking about, you little jerk!” I all but shouted.

“You’re the jerk,” hissed Jesse. “You’re always arguing with Dad and causing trouble around here!”

“I’m a man and he won’t admit it,” I all but shouted in his face.

“No you’re not,” he laughed. “You’re an asshole!”

I was frankly astonished that my normally adoring little brother would say such a thing to me. This was the kid who laughed at all my jokes, thought all the girls I liked were pretty and told me I was a genius when I brought home report cards that indicated otherwise. I was deflated. I walked back across the room and sat down heavily on my bed.

“Well, don’t just sit there,” said Jesse after a few moments. “Go stop the damned clock.”

In the semi darkness of the living room, lit only by the street light from outside, I stepped up to the clock, opened the little door and stopped the pendulum. Then I moved the hands ahead to 4 a.m. so it would look like the clock had given up the ghost in the middle of the night while Jesse and I were innocently asleep in our beds. I felt like a burglar in our own living room. I carefully closed up the clock and turned to go back to bed. My father sat across the room in a chair looking at me.

"It was keeping Jesse awake," I said.

"OK," he said.

"You did a nice job fixing it up, Dad," I said, in my best imitation of Beaver Cleaver.

"I'm sorry that I didn't let you help me with it," he said.

That made me feel guilty. Although I liked working with him ... when he let me take frequent breaks ... I wasn’t very interested in clock repair and was just as happy to work on my muscle building program and to fantasize about the girls in my classes at school.

"David," he said to me, "some things we need to search out for ourselves."

I hadn't the slightest idea what he was talking about.

"OK,” I said. "Well, gotta get to bed. Big geometry test tomorrow."

"Be nice to Jesse," he said. "he wears almost the same size shoe you do."

"You mean," I said, "like walk in his shoes or something?"

"No," he said, "I mean it won’t be long before he’s a lot bigger than you."

Dad seemed to mellow a bit after he finished the clock. Even Cousin Gene behaved himself following the episode and was never insulting again. I think he

learned more from my Dad's apology to him than had my father traded insults with him. We learn from those larger than ourselves. The clock was never mentioned during the few visits we made to Ilion before Grandma died the following year. After her funeral, we lost track of the little man and his family.

Dad never restarted the clock. He never said why. It sat unwound and quiet on the mantel for almost twenty five years. In time I noticed my father and the clock grew to be much alike as they both sat peaceful and unrushed through each day. As he grew in age and wisdom, the ceaseless tick tock of yearnings and disappointments gave way to an acceptance of the life he had been given. He learned to wait for each day to bring its joy or sorrow, and to not worry about things he could not yet see.

The clock was sold at a garage sale when my parents moved to a senior apartment. But after my father died, I was sorry I let him sell it. So last week, after standing a while staring up at another old clock, I asked the store owner to climb up and hand it down to me so I could buy it and bring it home. When I had set it on my desk, I opened the little door on the front, wound the mechanism, set the hands to the correct time and gave the pendulum a tiny shove. The clock went tick, tock. In a few moments, I reached in and stopped the pendulum. I sat there a few minutes thinking about my father. Then I closed the little door, leaving the clock silent.

I don't plan to start clock again. Stopped and unmoving, it never tells me how late the hour is getting. Instead, it waits for me like an old friend or a mentor … or a father … and allows me to cope with life at the speed of my own heartbeat. And the clock reminds me of a man who was much larger than me, who took a box of rusty gears and springs that could have loosed his anger or broken his heart, but instead turned it into lessons I've never forgotten.

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