



My Grandfather

Call me Sweeney, because everybody else does, but my name is James Patrick Sweeney, Junior. My sister's names are Colleen, Jeneen, Cathleen, and Maureen. My brothers are Mike and Pat. My mother, Gentilina is Welsh and Italian.

My grandfather Mike Sweeney died fifteen months after I was born. My grandmother Bridgi married Pat Joyce. He's foreman of the gravediggers at Holy Sepulcher Cemetery on Mission Boulevard in Hayward, California.

My childhood was hard, because it should be for the oldest boy in an Irish family. By the time I'm seven, I'm a real mulligan and, my father, he wasn't helping any either. The struggle had begun. My mother, she didn't know what to do and Pat Joyce liked me more than anyone, so my mother brought me to the cemetery to spend the day with my grandfather.

The gravediggers are all Irish, but they don't just bury Irish, they bury Portuguese, too. My grandfather drives a light blue Ford truck the same color as his eyes. There are three grave digging

crews working at different locations around the cemetery. I sit on his lap and steer between the holes. Sometimes the gravediggers let me operate the backhoe. Seems like everybody working at the cemetery is family.

In the morning, grass is rolled to the side and the gravediggers dig holes. Lots of worms live in the dark soil and the language is from the old country. John Flood and Pete Burke work at the cemetery, too. I know them from the family picnics and they try everything to scare me. Sometimes, when they dig the holes, the caskets to the side are exposed; everyone is careful. They tell me not to look, because if I look, the spirit might possess me.

Lunch is in a long room with windows all around. Green grass and white gravestones are all I see. Between my grandfather and his brother John, I sit at a big long table. All the gravediggers are from Connemara, around Galway, and after lunch fresh coffee is made and there is a bottle in a bag at the end of the table.

The music begins with just a penny whistle. A trill floats around the room. After awhile a drum goes boom, boom, boom. A guitar and a fiddle tune. My grandfather lays his accordion on the table. The sounds make my chest heavy. I fight tears and sway on the bench. A guitar and fiddle join the drum and whistle, then a banjo one string at a time. The sounds don't fit together. Gravestones shimmer diagonally on the green grass and tree shadows flutter between shafts of white light.

My grandfather picks up his accordion and pulls the strap over his shoulder. He's in no hurry. He writes on a yellow pad and pours from the brown bag. Next to him I sit with one leg on either side of the bench. His blue eyes smile and the sounds change. Not fast, nor slow, the shrill of the whistle, the beat of the drum, the screech of the fiddle, the twang of the banjo, the strum from the guitar, and the wail from my grandfather's accordion gather like a breeze and blow around the room.

I was born with jigs, ballads, dirges, and reels. I go to St. John's School and on Tuesdays we have dance. On Saturdays there's Irish music on the radio and we have a record player and Irish records. My father whistles lonely tunes.

My grandfather is union president for all the gravediggers around San Francisco. When he wants something done, he nods at Pete or John and they put down their guitar or fiddle, but the music doesn't lose a beat. Once, my grandfather leaves me alone with the gravediggers to take care of some business, shriveled old Mike falls on the floor in front of me. He lays there crying. I move to the corner, gravestones press against the windows and a bunch of crows flap their wings and the tree shadows dance. The gravediggers pick Mike up and set him in front of a cup of coffee.

The music goes on all afternoon. My grandfather plays guitar and piano, too. Everybody sings and sometimes the music is so sad it almost dies

but it never really does and another bottle appears and at the end of the day all the gravedigger's wives come to drive them home.

My grandfather slouches in the passenger seat of his new wife's Ford sedan. He nods his head. She raises her voice; Pat speaks in the old language and straightens up in his seat. He turns around to me, puts out his bottom lip, smiles, and winks.

When I'm eight, I ride my bike the twelve miles to the cemetery. My grandfather finds out that I didn't tell my parents. He's a big man and he grabs me by the shirt and shakes me hard. I won't look into his blue eyes. I want to sit on his lap and steer the truck. I want him to tell me stories about Galway and the Irish Army, but he shakes me again. I want to fish in the pond nestled in the brown hills behind the cemetery, but he's lifting me off the ground and he looks me right in the eye and tells me, "Sweeney, I'm not really your grandfather. My name is Joyce and I have to tell you, you may have a good life, but you're going to have a hard one, too."

The Grand Teton draws a purple outline on the blue Jackson Hole evening sky. Up and left Venus twinkles. There are a few other stars, but there isn't a cloud in the sky. Tourists bustle around her. Lots of traffic, a loud horn, and a biker turns right in front of her. The light changes green. She skips across the street and down the sidewalk holding the straw cowboy hat in her right hand. She stops at a doorway on the left for chocolate. The proprietor, well known for grumpiness slips her a wry smile with her chocolate raspberries. The clock reads 8:50. She hurries out the door.

Ivy dons the hat she bought for a dollar at a yard sale in front of the Million Dollar Cowboy Bar. She's lived in Jackson Hole for three years and has never been in the Cowboy Bar. She never drinks alcohol except for wine at church. Ivy's never danced and she's here for Sunday night line dancing lessons.

The Cowboy is big and open with a long bar on the right. Saddles take the place of stool seats