

MY GRANDMOTHER'S CLOCK

Reflecting on how several inanimate objects have journeyed with me on my life course, my grandmother's clock comes foremost to mind. From the time I can remember it hung on the wall of the tiny cottage my grandparents owned on Buffalo Lake in Central Wisconsin. Every summer, until I was 10 years old, we would spend my father's two-week summer vacation there in the woods at the end of a long, sandy track through the forest.

After unpacking the trailer, stacking groceries on the kitchen table, and placing boxes of towels, swimsuits, and new coloring books on the bed in one of the two tiny bedrooms, there remained two priorities. To begin with, having no indoor plumbing, the pump at the kitchen sink had to be primed. Secondly, the Delftware clock with the Dutch windmill scene that hung on the kitchen wall above the old round oak table, had to be wound.

Meanwhile my sister and I scampered down to the lake with strong warnings from my mother to stay off the pier until she or my father could join us. I meandered up along the creek that separated our yard from the next. I looked for frogs, so intent on catching flies, that I sometimes almost stepped on them. My next inspection was at the live bait box buried deep into the side of the creek. Lifting the heavy wooden lid, I could likely find a live carp or two or a catfish that my grandfather put there on his last visit.

For the next two weeks, sunny days were spent out in a neighboring field searching for frogs and snakes, or going with the family to the local beach in Montello. We also enjoyed hours of fun feeding peanuts to the resident chipmunks through a variety of homemade obstacle courses, a true-life lesson of "if there's a will, there's a way;" at least for chipmunks.

Rainy days were spent listening to childhood stories from my mother, or she read to us from books that she brought along. Crayons and coloring books kept us absorbed including my favorites, the paint-with-water books where the drawings would light up in color with a paint brush of water. Simple board games or a deck of cards also served us during the rainy times.

Days were kept busy and entertaining, but it was the nighttime that I most vividly recall, above all, the sounds. My sister and I shared a double bed in one of the two bedrooms. It was separated by a curtain from the kitchen-living area, the third room of the cottage. We would crawl into the bed, springs squeaking nosily. Out in the kitchen, we could hear the thump of the logs being placed into the old wood-burning stove, the quick flip of a match and the clatter of the burner lid being replaced. With a clank and a gurgle, the teakettle was filled at the sink with the hand pump and placed on the stove for some hot washing-up water after a day of fishing or working in the yard.

Outside, the crickets and frogs chirped out their mating songs as did the whippoorwills and owls deeper in the woods. June bugs could be heard flying into the old screen door with a tiny thump as they headed into the kitchen lights shining through the mesh. Anytime my mother or father would go out or come back in, the door would close with a whine of the spring as it snapped back into its frame.

Most of all, as if keeping cadence with life inside our cottage and outside in the woods, giving the beat for the dance of the universe, was the tick-tock of that Delft clock in the kitchen. It was the sound that supported everything else. It was that clock on which I learned to tell time, and suddenly, knowing how time worked, never again experienced boredom. And so with the rhythmic tick-tock of my grandmother's clock, I would fall into a deep slumber, while my parents sat at the kitchen table speaking in subdued tones, recalling the day's events or planning for the next, while shuffling cards for their next canasta hand.

When my grandmother died and I was living in Iceland, my mother phoned me and asked if there was anything special of Grandma's that I wanted. I named two things; an old colorful Mexican blanket that used to be thrown over the couch on my grandparents' screened porch in Milwaukee and, most importantly, the Delftware clock from the cottage on Buffalo Lake.

On my next trip to the States, I carefully packed the clock into my carryon, and I brought it back to Iceland with me. There it hung in my kitchen for 20 years, keeping time, moving the present into the future as my marriage with Runi prospered and my children grew. Late at night when I would come down the steep stairs to the kitchen, the rest of the house deadly silent, the clock would assure me that life continued to move forward.

When Runi died after 32 years of marriage, I eventually fell in love again and returned to Wisconsin. I brought the clock with me. I married Jan who was born in the Netherlands and immigrated to the United States as a young child. To reflect his heritage, Jan always wanted a kitchen decorated with Delftware, a type of blue and white earthenware originating in the town of Delft in the Netherlands.

Now my grandmother's clock has a place of honor in our kitchen in Whitefish Bay. It is accompanied by several other pieces that emulate Jan's heritage, items from his parents, and a plate that my son, Andri, gave me when he returned from three years of study in Amsterdam. The clock fits well, and it continues to count the minutes, the hours, and the days of our lives with its steady tick-tock of assurance that life is still unfolding for all of us.