

Thomas Lynch's formative moments

by [Thomas Lynch](#)

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I was raised by Irish Catholics. Even as I write that it sounds a little like "wolves" or some especially feral class of creature. I don't mean this in the nativist sense of brutish hordes, but in the sense of sure faith and fierce family loyalties, the pack dynamics of their clannishness, their vigilance and pride. My parents were grandchildren of immigrants who had all married within their tribe.

The only moderating influence to this bloodline and gene pool was provided by my paternal grandmother, a woman of Dutch extraction, who came from a long line of Daughters of the American Revolution. She was a temperate Methodist, an Eisenhower Republican, a wonderful cook and seamstress and gardener who never gossiped or gave any scandal to her family until early in the so-called roaring twenties, when she was smitten by and betrothed to marry an Irish Catholic. This was not good news to her parents and their circle.

As was the custom of her generation, to appease her fiancé's priest she "converted" to what she would ever after refer to as "the one true faith?"--the lilt appended to the end of the declarative shoving a foot of doubt in the door, as if the apostle with a finger in the wounds of the risen Christ had queried, "My Lord, My God?" She took a kind of dark glee in explaining the conversion experience to her grandchildren, to wit: "Ah, the priest splashed a little water on me and said, 'Geraldine, you were born a Methodist, raised a Methodist. Thanks be to God, now you're Catholic.'"

Some weeks after the nuptials, she was out in the backyard, grilling sirloins for my grandfather on the first Friday in Lent when one of the brother

knights from the Knights of Columbus leapt over the back fence to upbraid her for the smell of beef rising over a Catholic household during the holy season. She listened, nodded and smiled, walked over to the garden hose, splashed water on the grill and professed, "You were born cows, raised cows. Thanks be to God, now you are fish." She then sent the nosy neighbor on his way.

"Surely, we are all God's children," she would append to her narrative, "the same but different."

My

grandmother's telling of this filled me with doubts and wonders, which seem these years since like elements of faith. And I was smitten at the power of language, which could, in a twinkling, turn cows into fish. It made me hunger for such "author-ity." And made me less of a Catholic, I suppose—variously devout and devoutly lapsed, and yet more catholic somehow, in the way Paul wrote to the Corinthians in the first century and John XXIII wrote in the last: a sense that we are all fellow pilgrims in search of a way home.

For all her efforts at temperance, my grandmother became, like many converts, as crazed as the unruly crowd she'd married into—for whom everything had meaning beyond the obvious and life was the slow unfolding of metaphors and mysteries the cipher for which lay just beyond our reach.

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