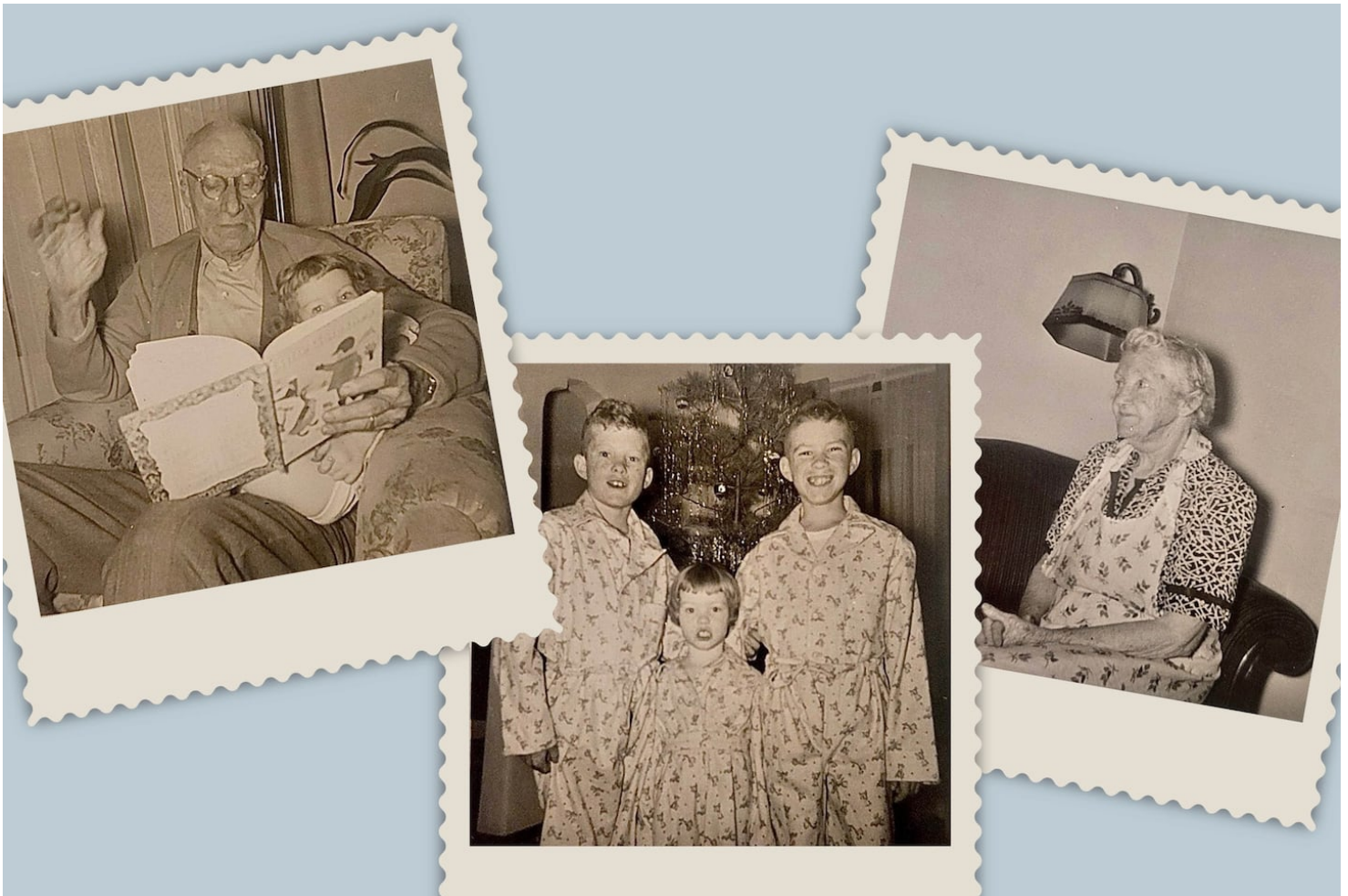


IDEAS

Winter is the wistful season

I'll be home for Christmas — if only in my dreams.

By **Bob Regan** Updated December 20, 2024, 3:00 a.m.



In San Francisco, c. 1957: Left, the author's grandfather, Thomas, and his sister, Jean. Middle, from left, the author, his sister, and their brother, Tom. Right, the author's grandmother, Mary Regan, in her de rigueur apron. JEAN REGAN BOURNE

My grandmother, Mary Regan (née Cluny), barely 5 feet tall, greeted us at the door with fluttery hugs and powdery kisses, one hand covering her smile, with parchment

skin, wispy white hair bobby-pinned in a bun, an ever-present white apron over a flowered dress, nylons sagging around bird-like ankles, black lace-up oxfords.

It was Christmas Eve, 1954. I can still smell the fresh-cut pine, feel the spell cast by the ancient braided-wire lights, red and green, yellow and blue, chipped over God knows how many Christmases past; the crinkled strands of aluminum tinsel exhumed from their yellowed, WWII-era newspaper shrouds; the same worn ornaments hung year after year, sturdy spun glass, threadbare cloth angels.

My 6-foot-4-inch grandfather observed silently from his wood and leather chair, looking, from my child's vantage, like no one so much as Abe Lincoln in his stone memorial, his expression inscrutable. Weariness? Tolerance of our anticipation-fueled exuberance? Satisfaction at seeing his bloodline carried forward into 1950s modernity by a flock of redheaded grandchildren? My hazy memories, hazier still with smoke from my father's Pall Malls, my uncle's Camels, the toxic fog in which we had been steeped from birth. To this day, the flick of a match and a whiff of sulfur dioxide can transport me back 70 years.

And always the plaintive, crooning songs from a glowing Emerson console radio. Lush string arrangements swirled beneath worldly, knowing voices promising "I'll be home for Christmas," yearning for what used to be, my 6-year-old self sensing, even then, that it was not to be.

Those few days each year in that stone row house on Santa Ysabel Avenue in San Francisco imprinted on my psyche: the murmured rosaries, a whiff of mothballs, my child's awareness of advancing age, mine and theirs, the memories still vibrant after more than half a century of other Christmases in other houses. Home, fleeting.

And so this season will always be tempered by a winter wistfulness, a vague longing for a past, real or imagined, for the presence of loved ones long since passed. I wonder

now if my grandmother dreamt of her girlhood Christmases in the west of Ireland in the 1890s, surrounded by a dozen brothers and sisters, a wreath of wild holly, a turf fire, and the privilege, by virtue of being named Mary, of lighting the Christmas candle to guide the Christ child to their door. She would take leave of them all at age 16 on a steamship bound for America, never to return.

The solstice sun makes its low arc over the horizon, then yields to dark night, and I allow myself to sink into my reminiscences, into the melancholy-tinged pleasures of yesteryears, nurturing a lost child's belief that we might all find our way home, warm ourselves by the fire, and unwrap some small magic in this world.

... if only in my dreams.

Bob Regan is a songwriter in Nashville and the founder of [OperationSong.org](https://www.operation-song.org).

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