

Ian Lewis: Hey, uh, my name's Ian Lewis, and I'm a radio producer, but, uh, I'm actually not going to share something of mine here. My great aunt, Beth, my mother's cousin, really, but older, was something of a producer herself. She lived in San Francisco, the neighborhood they called The Sunset, and, uh, my family went out to stay with her when I was young, twelve, maybe, from Boston. My first time on a plane, actually. I'd never seen a city like that. I mean, Boston was all brick and brown, and, uh, here was this place where the houses, I mean, her neighborhood got its name because it's, you know, the western edge of the city along the ocean where the sun sets. But, uh, I always thought it was because of all the color.

Anyway, during that trip, I remember my aunt was always carrying around this cassette recorder, like an old Marantz, I think, and a microphone and headphones. There's this, uh, photo of us all, uh, under the Golden Gate, and she's got her headphones on. Um, she, she died about a year ago and, uh, my mom went out to help with the apartment, her things and all that. So I asked her to look out for any of these recordings Beth made and, uh, she sent me a whole box of tapes. So, uh, I've been going through them and I found this one.

It's, uh, an interview my aunt did with, um, you know, sounds like an older guy, a sort of neighborhood historian, but it wasn't what I was expecting to hear. Um, the label on it says, A History of the Sunset, Patrick Moylan, 1992. And, uh, I'll just go ahead and play it now.

Great Aunt Beth: Okay, do you need anything before we get started?

Patrick Moylan: Nope, nope.

Beth: Glass of water?

Moylan: Nope, nope, I'm fine.

Beth: Okay. Just so I can check my levels, can you tell me your name and where we are?

Moylan: Sure. Patrick Moylan, uh, in my house. Right now on Lawton, between 30th and 31st, in the Sunset District, San Francisco.

Beth: Okay, great. Thank you. Okay, so, like we talked about the other day, could you tell me what you know about the creation of this neighborhood from the beginning?

Moylan: Sure. Yeah. Uh, you want me to start with Henry Dolger?

Beth: If that's the beginning, sure.

Moylan: Well, you know, in the beginning, there was just sand. Hardly anyone ever came down from the city in those days. It was just wild lands. The Outerlands, they called it. Cold ocean, wind, and sand. Miles of sand. Went all the way up past 19th in these great dunes as big as houses.

Beth: How long was it like that? Nobody living here?

Moylan: Yeah, well, they really started building after the earthquake. The city was in ruins. All these people with nowhere to go. So, developers came in, bought up the land.

Beth: And this is where Henry Dolger comes in?

Moylan: Yeah.

Beth: Can you tell me about him?

Moylan: Henry Dolger was born here in the city, end of the century, German family. Left school age ten or something and eventually formed a construction business with his two brothers. Dolger ended up buying most of the land that would become The Sunset and had a kind of assembly line going, building houses. He streamlined it all, even down to the painting. He figured it'd be quicker if his guys weren't changing their paints all the time, so he just had them stick to one color for each row. And that's how it was. You had a row of blue houses, then red houses, white, yellow, purple, green, just alternating like that down to the ocean. Pretty soon the whole neighborhood was built.

Beth: So when did your family come here? Who was it, you said? Your grandparents?

Moylan: Yeah. My grandparents got a house. A red one. Would have been, 1913, 14.

Beth: This one?

Moylan: Yeah, this one.

Beth: How long have you been here?

Moylan: In this house, you mean? All my life. They raised me in it. Here, here in this spot, though—that's a different question.

Beth: So, can you tell me about the, um, event? How old were you when it first happened?

Moylan: The first time it happened, I think I was eight, maybe. It was early winter, one of those perfect, clear days. But there was something funny about the air. It was heavy static on the radio, and the dogs were all barking. Then night came, and the winds started. We were maybe twenty-five blocks up from the beach, but it sounded like the ocean was right outside our door.

I remember waking up, and it was really bright. Sunny. Brighter than my room ever was before.

And I could hear, through the wall, a neighbor practicing the piano. And I thought, when did the Flanagans get a piano?

Downstairs the house was quiet. The front door was wide open, so I walked out into the street. It was full of people, just standing, in silence. Across the street, in what was a row of entirely white houses when I went to bed the night before, was a purple house. A green house on either side. Well, I turned around to check what house I woke up in, you know, and there it was: our red house. Our cat in the bedroom window. Next door where the Flanagan's red house should have been was a blue house.

Well, no one said a word, but, after a while, everyone seemed to think, "Well, we're going to be late for work or school," or what have you. So they

got into their cars, started them up. Kids started walking down the sidewalk to school. But nobody drove off. On the sidewalk, the kids all stopped. Turned around. Nobody knew where they were. Where they were going.

People had all kinds of theories. About Dolger. About the sand. Burial grounds, but—I used to stay up listening to the radio, the weather forecast, hoping for that static. And when the winds hit, and the house started creaking, I'd lie in bed too excited to sleep. I mean [coughs], where would we wake up?

There was a girl at school, Valerie. She lived in a yellow house. When I woke up, after those nights, I'd run downstairs out into the street, see if she lived next door.

Our red house began to mellow and fade in the fog and salt. Became a dull brick red.

When I was just out of school, my grandparents passed, and the house passed to me. It was far up off Lawton that summer, facing east, with a mulberry tree on the sidewalk. And every morning, my room was full of the shadows of birds fighting over the berries.

And then, I was gone. Stationed in the Philippines. Three years.

Things were different when I got back. Not just moved around, I mean. One morning this pub was suddenly in the middle of a row of family housing. Kids stepping over some drunks on the way to school. And a bunch of parents got together and demanded the city do something. You had these politicians coming in from downtown making promises about locking certain things in place. Engineering plans to tie whole streets together, stuff like that. But none of it ever worked. And the politicians would eventually give up and move on.

Some people just couldn't do it anymore. They'd get tired of it all. Put their houses on the market and went someplace where they'd know they'd wake up where they went to bed, you know?

I'd go for long walks in the mornings and some mornings everything was just different. Of course, I was always getting lost, but I wasn't in any hurry then.

I had this camera and I started taking it with me on my walks, photographing the neighborhood, the houses, and I started to see just how much they changed from each other. I mean, depending on where they'd spent their years. Down by the ocean in the fog, or up high in the sun. They'd all become different.

Where you used to have just blue, you know. Now you had all these different blues. Some had faded or lightened. Others had these dark patinas. Now, you had periwinkle houses. Indigo houses, baby blue houses. And it was all like that. Every block, every color. I mean, tangerine, vermilion, marigold, mustard, olive, cobalt, rose, mauve, chestnut, ivory, gold, burgundy, cadmium, cream, lavender, amber [coughs].

One morning. I found Valerie's house. It was just a block away. Still bright yellow. She didn't live there anymore.

Well, you're sitting down for dinner one night. You see someone parked outside your house. Car running. Looking, not, not in the windows, just at them. Then you do it too. Driving. Thoughts elsewhere. Find yourself where your home used to be, down by the ocean, near the bakery. But you're across town now, facing north, with a cold kitchen.