

Grandpa's Kisses

Chapter 21

Several months before and after Stuart's removal, I verged on the brink of an emotional breakdown. I had lost my self-esteem. I had gone from being one of the top students during my six years at grammar school, to being just a so-so student in the seventh-grade. Now at age twelve, I felt no purpose for my life, and any direction that I was given made little sense. My feigned belief in Mama's Club only made things worse. I wanted to stand up to Mama, but I couldn't.

While I clearly knew what I did not believe, that did me little good. What I needed was a good psychologist who could talk with Mama and me, and tell us how I could regain my self-confidence. But that wasn't going to happen. Getting help from a college-educated psychologist was a no-no. Club members believed that emotional problems were solved by reading the Watchtower and with help from an elder.

If things were going to turn around, I needed to find someone I could trust and something I could believe in—something that gave meaning to my life and a hope for the future. I also needed to be able to make a meaningful contribution to a world that Mama believed was destined for destruction. While none of this seemed likely to happen, things would change during our summer vacation in July 1956.

Growing Up In Mama's Club

The vacation started like all previous trips to visit my grandparents. I was very excited and more than ready, knowing that for three weeks we wouldn't attend a Club meeting. I wouldn't have to go from door to door selling the *Watchtower*, *Awake!*, or other Club literature. And I would get to spend time with normal people I loved, like Grandma, Grandpa, and my cousin Danny, in a place that I dreamed of living almost every day of my life.

The drive from our home in West Los Angeles to Robin, Idaho, started when Papa came home from work on a Friday afternoon in midsummer. Mama had the luggage packed and a small arsenal of sandwiches, fruit, celery, carrots, cookies, and thermos bottles filled to the brim with Kool-Aid. We would only have to stop for gas, potty breaks, or to replenish the radiator with water we carried in a canvas bag roped over the hood ornament on the front of the car. At midnight, we were in the middle of the Mojave Desert with all the windows rolled down, and all was well. Mama and Mary were slumped over, sleeping in the front seat of our faded green 1947 Plymouth. Susan and Tim slept like logs in the back seat with me. Papa and I were wide awake as he alertly steered us to the Promised Land.

Papa stopped for gas on the outskirts of Las Vegas, Nevada, not yet the big city it would become. Mama woke up and gently eased her door open, hoping none of us kids would waken. I quietly opened my door and stepped outside. It was warm and a soft, gentle wind greeted my perspiring forehead. The nearby lights flickered on and off, giving a surreal feel to my new surroundings. Although I should have been dog-tired, I felt wired and fully alive.

At first, Papa didn't notice that I was outside of the car. But when he did, he was quick to say, "Dickie, why are you up? You should be sleeping. Get back in the car."

Fortunately, Mama responded by saying, "Now Jack, leave him alone. If he can't sleep, he can't sleep."

Much later that day, as we crossed the Utah border into Idaho, I knew that we had less than two hours before we would be at Grandma and Grandpa's house. I still had not gotten a wink of sleep,

Grandpa's Kisses

but neither had Papa in what would be a twenty-four-hour drive from our house to theirs. As I contemplated our arrival, I thought about Grandma and how she would kiss me on the lips when I got to the front door. And as much as I loved her, I always dreaded that greeting. But I couldn't avoid it. Grandma's kiss was the price I would have to pay to live with them for the next three weeks.

As our car rolled slowly up the gravel road, the sight of the massive gap in the mountain, less than a mile west of my grandparents' property, overwhelmed me. Tears welled in my eyes, my stomach churned, and I felt lightheaded. This was a sacred landmark, a shrine that captured the mystery and majesty of creation. Even to this day, when I first see the Gap, I feel the presence of a grand, creative force. At each glance, I'm always washed over by gratefulness for the life with which I've been blessed.

As we tumbled out of the car, I lingered behind. Mary was the first to get Grandma's kiss. Then Grandpa shook her hand. What a contrast in expressing their love. I was fourth in line to



The Gap

get Grandma's kiss, and when it was over I felt special and loved. Mama never showed that kind of affection. Next was Grandpa's handshake. He held my hand in both of his hands and vigorously shook them. It was Grandpa's way of saying that he was glad I was there. But still I wondered why Grandma kissed us and Grandpa shook our hand.

I felt comfortable as soon as we walked into their house. This

was where I belonged. Grandpa's unique and familiar body odor lingered pleasantly in the air. I felt safe and secure. For the first few minutes, the house was filled with lively, pleasant chatter about our drive and the status of relatives and common friends. Grandma excused herself to start dinner. Soon the engaging aroma of fried chicken trickled into the living room.

When we were asked to come to the dinner table, a large platter of steaming hot chicken breasts, legs, wings, and thighs greeted us. It was joined by a large white bowl of fresh, steamed green beans smothered in bacon bits; thin, fried slices of golden brown Idaho potatoes; puffy, mouthwatering homemade biscuits; creamy rich butter; homemade chokecherry, strawberry, and blackberry preserves; and large glasses of cold milk. As soon as everyone was seated, we began eating in earnest.

No prayer was said before dinner or any meal at my grandparents' house. I liked that. I always felt uncomfortable with Club members' mealtime prayers. First of all, a woman couldn't pray when a man was present. And when Papa prayed before a meal, the food always got cold before he finished his boring and meandering conversation with his God.

Our dinner that early evening tasted as good as it looked. After a dessert of lemon meringue pie, my lack of sleep for thirty-six hours hit me. I wasn't bashful about letting Grandma know I was ready for bed. My request made her laugh and she said, "Now that's a first for you. Normally, your mom has to ask you to go to bed several times before you're ready." Then she grabbed my hand and escorted me to the basement, where a large featherbed awaited me.

When I awoke the next morning, light was just beginning to find its way through the narrow basement windows. Translucent colors radiated from the large blue-tinted mason jars that housed Grandma's canned tomatoes, green and yellow string beans, and chokecherry jellies. I was mesmerized. Years later in Paris, while admiring Notre Dame's stained glass windows, I was reminded of that morning in 1956 when I experienced the surreal beauty of light and colors in my sanctuary.

Grandpa's Kisses

After my short morning worship, I quietly slipped out of bed, making sure not to awaken Tim. I dressed and walked up the creaking wooden steps. No one was up yet. I looked for Grandpa's hats hanging on the wall of the indoor porch and found one of my favorites. It had his signature smell. I pulled it tightly over my head and went outdoors. To my pleasant surprise, Grandpa was saddling his horse, Silver, just outside the barbed-wire fence that kept the cattle and horses off the thick green grass surrounding the house. I began walking in Grandpa's direction when he spotted me. "Well, good morning, Dickie. You caught me just in time. Do you want to ride with me to check on the cattle?" His white-faced Hereford steers were pasturing on the other side of the Gap. I could hardly believe my good luck, and I let him know immediately that I was more than ready for a big adventure.

Making our way up to the Gap, I felt glad to be alive. The smell of high mountain sage filled the crisp air, and I basked in the bright morning sun. Once we reached the bottom floor of the Gap, the sun abandoned us. It was cold as we zigzagged our way through Grandpa's granite sanctuary. The sounds of fast running water coming from Garden Creek alongside the narrow road's edge and of our horse prancing in cadence on the loose gravel echoed off the canyon walls. It was music to my ears. Not a word was spoken between Grandpa and me on our ride. He wasn't one to make small talk. Although when he was among a group of friends or relatives, he loved to tell humorous stories about his six younger brothers and neighbors in Robin. Grandpa initiated little or no conversation on a one-on-one basis with me. I had to do that. Two miles from the house and twenty minutes later, we were on the other side of the Gap.

Grandpa spotted his cattle right away. After counting, he discovered that one was missing. We rode around the barbed-wire fence that was supposed to keep them in and found a section that had been trampled down. Fortunately, only one steer had gotten out. After repairing the fence, he told me, "Sorry, Dickie, but you'll have to stay here while I round up that son of a bitch." I'd heard that kind

Growing Up In Mama's Club

of language before, so it was no big surprise. When it came to an obstinate cow or horse, that's what Grandpa called it. If it was a particularly irritable animal, he'd say "why you goddamned son of a bitch." Other than that, Grandpa never swore. And because Club members were strongly and regularly advised never to swear, as Jehovah found those words disgusting and the use of them could bar your entry into the new world, it was a naughty pleasure for me to hear Grandpa do a little cussing.

Once Grandpa found the "son of a bitch" and corralled him with the other steers, he asked if I'd like to do some fishing at the head of Garden Creek, which was only a few yards away. "We just might catch enough brookies (brook trout) for breakfast this morning, Dickie. Wouldn't you like Grandma to dip those tasty morsels in flour and deep-fry them? Nothing goes better with eggs sunny side up." My mouth watered as I told him what a great idea it was.

But the fishing gods weren't with us that morning. The only bites I got were from wood ticks. I broke the silence by asking, "Grandpa, why do you think Mama is attracted to such a strange religion?" Grandpa jerked his head like he had a big fish on the line. At first, I didn't think he was going to answer me. Then he turned and looked directly at me for the longest time. Was I about to get a scolding? It looked like he was doing some serious thinking before he finally smiled and patted me on the shoulder.

"Dickie, you're not alone in thinking that your parents' religious views are a bit strange. What's unusual is that you are questioning their views. Most young people accept the views of their parents. It's our nature to conform, and most people believe what they're raised to believe. Now take me. My mother was born and raised a Mormon. That denomination answered her questions about life and helped give her life meaning and a hope for the hereafter. She liked that and wasn't about to change. My dad, on the other hand, was a nonbeliever. But he was happy that my mother had something that she believed in. The only time they had problems was when she tried to shame him into becoming a believer like her. Then he'd push back with a vengeance, telling her that religion got its

Grandpa's Kisses

following from surrounding influences and atmospheres, not from study or thinking, and to stop pushing him.

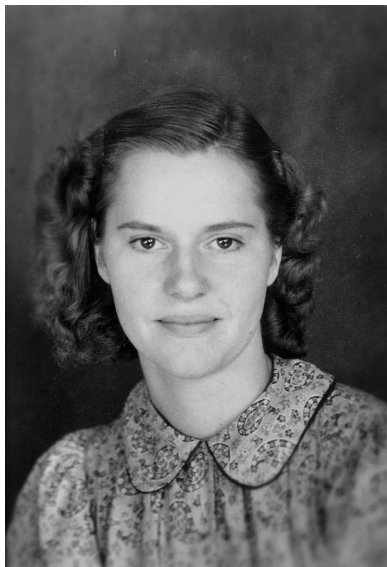
“My father let my mother raise me as a Mormon. I was baptized as one because that’s what my mama wanted. But even then, I pretty well figured out, at least for me, that religion was not what a person says they believe—but the way they lived their life. Unfortunately, the folks that make the biggest fuss about religious doctrines and why theirs are better than the next guy’s were more often than not the biggest hypocrites. So when it was time to make my choice, I decided I wouldn’t go to church or spend time trying to figure out all the stuff that supposedly makes God happy. I don’t know if there’s any evidence of life after death, but then I don’t know if there’s any evidence against it. Soon enough, we’ll all find out. So I don’t figure it does me any good to spend time thinking about such things.”

He went on to tell me that one of the things that attracted him to Grandma was that she had religious beliefs and a childhood background similar to his. Grandma’s mother was a Mormon and her father a Methodist. Differences in her parents’ beliefs had caused a lot of tension and stress during her childhood. While Grandma had been baptized a Methodist, she had come to the same conclusion about religion that Grandpa had. And while the absence of religion had worked well in their marriage, my mama was probably more like her grandmothers and needed the structure, set beliefs, and association of a particular religious group. He just hadn’t seen her need clearly when he and Grandma were raising their four kids.

Unfortunately, Grandpa couldn’t do anything about it now, and if I wanted to blame someone for what she now believed and how she was raising me, he figured that he and Grandma were partly to blame. He told me that it wouldn’t be long before I would be able to make my own choices in life. What I needed to do was focus on getting the best education I could get. School was very important. The better educated I was, the better chance I would have to lead a happy and successful life when I was ready to leave home and make decisions about how I would live my life and in what I believed.

Growing Up In Mama's Club

Grandpa then looked into my eyes and he gave me a long stern look that said this conversation was between just him and me. God help me if any of this got back to Mama, Grandma, or anyone else in our immediate family. Grandpa was a very private person and what was said between the two of us stayed with the two of us. It is now fifty years later and I've never told a soul, until now. Hopefully, Grandpa will understand.



Mama (Gail Evans) at sixteen after graduating from high school.

During that vacation with my grandparents and one the following year, I learned more things about Mama. Grandma confessed to me that she believed Mama suffered from a melancholy similar to hers. Living so far away from civilization had triggered it. Mama wasn't like Grandpa, who could find sufficient spiritual sustenance from what Mother Nature offered and live happily in an uncertain world. Mama wasn't able to tolerate ambiguity. She needed well-defined beliefs and answers to her questions about God, His purpose for man, and life

after death. She needed the fellowship of people who believed as she did to help her feel secure in an insecure world.

Years later, I learned that Mama had looked for love and meaning for life in all the wrong places during her teenage years. After graduating from high school, at age sixteen, she left home to live in the big city. First it was Pocatello, then Salt Lake City, and finally Los Angeles. A year before I was born, she had considered living as a plural wife with a polygamist group who claimed to be the true followers of Jesus Christ and Joseph Smith, the founder

Grandpa's Kisses

of the Mormon Church. Grandma was grateful that Mama had decided not to go in that direction. She wanted me to know that things could be much worse.

As I processed new information about Mama and my grandparents, I better understood how my life had come to be what it was. I didn't dislike it any less, but it helped make my situation more tolerable. And I decided that the best thing I could do was to focus all my energies on getting the best education I could get.

I asked Grandpa if he would recommend books or authors for me to read when I got back home. He told me that his favorite authors were Mark Twain, Carl Sandburg, Will Rogers, and Robert Service. When I told him that I had read *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*, he laughed and told me that he enjoyed those stories as well. But he wanted me to try to figure out what these writers ultimately believed about life and the pursuit of happiness. He hoped this would help me improve my thinking skills.

My 1956 vacation was far from over. That night, after Grandpa had talked with me behind the Gap, we sat in my grandparents' living room while they told us several stories about Mama and her siblings growing up. As I relaxed, I unconsciously slipped the middle two fingers on my right hand into my mouth and sucked them. When Grandma saw me, she let out a gasp. "What in heaven's name are you doing, Dickie?" Tim told her that I'd been sucking my fingers again. Grandma looked at Mama for confirmation. She nodded her head "yes." Grandma asked if she could talk with me privately, and Mama agreed.

Grandma led me to her bedroom and asked me to sit on the bed. She closed the door and sat down on a nearby chair. "Dickie, I suspect that a lot of stuff is going on in your life to get you to start sucking your fingers again. But I just think that you're way too old to be doing that kind of thing. I have a thick wool sock that I want you to wear on your right hand whenever you're in my house. I don't think it will take long before you'll stop that silly habit." After putting the sock on my hand, she asked me to give

Growing Up In Mama's Club

her a kiss and told me that we could join the others. I flinched, gave her a kiss on the lips, and went back into the living room. I had to wear that sock whenever I was in the living room late in the day or in my bed. But Grandma's cure worked. I never sucked my fingers again.

If that wasn't embarrassment enough, on the second night of our stay, I experienced some discomfort while taking my bath. I noticed a black spot on one of my testicles and it hurt. It hurt so badly that I was willing to tell Mama about it. As soon as she saw it, she recommended that Grandma look at it. This seemed a bit much, but I knew by then that I needed help. When Grandma inspected it, she knew right away that it was a wood tick. Left alone, it would eventually burrow itself under my skin. It needed to be removed immediately. Most likely, the tick had found its present home when Grandpa and I sat down to fish the day before. She pinched and pushed and, to my great relief, pulled it out.

During the last week of our vacation, my mother's sister, Norma, and her husband, Ralph, joined us. Mama tried on several occasions to convert them with her unique interpretation of the Bible. Both Aunt Norma and Uncle Ralph expertly articulated a rebuttal to Mama's Club beliefs. But Mama couldn't or wouldn't believe what they had to say. It dawned on me that at the core of Mama's belief system was that she had to change other people's beliefs to the way she believed. That was the Club way, and facts and data would never sway Mama. It embarrassed me to hear Mama expound so vehemently on her religious beliefs. Her weak argument could be best described in words that Abraham Lincoln once used: "It had got down as thin as soup made by boiling the shadow of a pigeon that had starved to death."

Fortunately, Mama and her sister didn't argue religion all the time. Every afternoon we'd set up a card table on the lush green lawn surrounding my grandparents' home and play pinochle. Papa partnered with Uncle Ralph, while Grandpa and I were teammates. Occasionally, Grandpa would get a big hand and announce that he was going to "shoot the moon," which meant he was going to

Grandpa's Kisses

take all the tricks. If he was successful, we could win up to 1,500 points and the game. While a bit unusual, he never failed to make his ambitious bids. Watching him play those high-stake hands were exciting and suspenseful moments. When it was obvious that he was going to take all the tricks, he'd slap that last card down hard on the table and break into a hysterical laughter, contagious to anyone within earshot. Once after "shooting the moon," he was so excited he jumped out of his chair, did cartwheels on the grass, and walked upright on his hands for several yards before proudly announcing, "Now how many sixty-year-old grandpas can do that?" Then he laughed and hooted for the longest time.

Every midafternoon at precisely the same time, a stiff wind swooped mysteriously down upon us from the Bannock Mountains to our west. The eerie but pleasant breeze lasted five to ten minutes before it suddenly disappeared. If I hadn't known better, it would have been easy to think Mother Nature was trying to tell me something. I never knew exactly what, although I suspected Grandpa heard the message clearly. He always stopped what he was doing, even if he was playing pinochle, to use all his senses to listen. He appeared to cherish those moments as if they were holy. I wondered if it was similar to how Mama believed that God's Spirit had changed the course of history by blowing through at Pentecost. Perhaps in Grandpa's world, this strong but controlled breeze helped him keep his faith, such as it was. The natural world spoke to him in many different ways.

During our time in Robin, I also spent time with my cousin Danny. He lived on the farm directly west of my grandparents'. We played games, fished, and explored the nearby woods, streams, and mountains together. Like Grandpa, we appreciated how special this part of the world was. No church or cathedral could equal its ethereal beauty. We never said a word about religion, although Mama asked me after the first week of our vacation if I had told Danny about the new world yet. When I told her "no," and asked her how she would like it if all Danny talked about was going to heaven and how great it would be to be there together someday,

she said, "But he doesn't have the truth. You do." Mama always had to have the last word, but I wasn't about to talk religion with Danny. I knew he was a Mormon and believed that way because that's what his mother taught him. I respected that. What bothered me was that he probably thought I believed what Mama did, and I wanted to tell him differently, although I knew that wasn't a good idea.

Shortly after we were back in Los Angeles, I read Mark Twain's essay on "Corn Pone Opinions." I had never read anything like that before. I was particularly impressed with his notion that "Mohammedans are Mohammedans because they are born and reared among that sect, not because they have thought it out and can furnish sound reasons for being Mohammedans; we know why Catholics are Catholics; why Presbyterians are Presbyterians; why Baptists are Baptists; and why Mormons are Mormons. We know it is a matter of association and sympathy, not reasoning and examination; that hardly a man in the world has an opinion upon religion which he got otherwise than through his associations and sympathies."

I wondered what might have happened had I been raised by Danny's mom, Aunt Camilla, and Danny been raised by Mama. Would I have been a Mormon and Danny a happy member of the Club?

I had also come to the conclusion that kisses weren't all that bad, after all. Grandma kissed me once again on the lips when we left, and I liked it. That was her way of reminding me that she loved me. And I learned that I liked Grandpa's kisses even better. Every day during the three-week visit, I noticed that he kissed life to the fullest. Even when those "sons of a bitches" riled him up, it didn't last long and he was back to savoring each moment. He did everything with gusto, whether he was working in his wheat fields, walking his way down Garden Creek or Marsh Creek to look for that special spot where he'd catch lots of brook trout, laughing at the end of a good story, catching grasshoppers for fish bait, fixing fences, riding his horses Silver and Pinto, talking farm talk with his cronies in Arimo or Downey, hiking to the top of "Old Tom" (the

Grandpa's Kisses

highest point on the Bannock Mountains), playing pinochle, herding his cattle with his dog Rex, roasting marshmallows over a bonfire on the other side of the Gap, telling his grandkids there was a live mouse in his bicep when he flexed it, or simply eating a meal. And he didn't need or use alcohol or tobacco to help him enjoy life. He loved the natural world and heard its sounds. He found comfort in the soil and how it helped him earn a living. He respected the beauty and mystery of all things, whether they were living organisms or inanimate objects. Grandpa kissed life every day.