

VISITING GRAMMA AND GRAMPA

Twenty-nine miles apart as the crow flies are the cities of Toledo, Ohio, where I grew up, and much smaller Adrian, Michigan, where my mother was raised, northwest of Toledo. Now when I go back to Toledo to visit, I can phone my Adrian cousin, tell her I'll be there soon, drive to her apartment for a few hours' visit and be back in Toledo for an early supper, even though the route appears to wander off a bit in the wrong direction. I'm often surrounded by a steady parade of massive and somewhat intimidating semis bearing who knows what all.

But it has not always been that easy. I remember when traveling from our house on Toledo's west side to my maternal grandparents' house in Adrian was a major outing that required getting up early, leaving just after sunrise, and returning home after dark.

My grandparents had no phone and for a long time neither did we. However, an unannounced visit back then was not usually a problem because most people were always at home. Certainly my grandparents seldom left their home.

Whenever we decided to visit, the four of us piled into our dark green 1941 Chevrolet four-door sedan, Pop driving, Mom beside him in the front passenger seat, and we kids occupying the back seat. My brother Bus, two years my junior, and I, unlike most siblings, got along fairly well on car rides. We didn't dare do otherwise or we knew we'd get a good paddling; my father brooked no nonsense. Oh, there was some surreptitious elbow jabbing and a whole repertoire of dirty looks between us, all behind Pop's back and below his rearview mirror perspective.

The route consisted mostly of two-lane roads that meandered at a series of right angles around the neat squares and rectangles of flat farmland, clear testimony to the importance of the family farms that dominated this rural area. Whether county road commissioners ever thought of attempting eminent domain to seize property in order to slice a diagonal road across farms, I don't know. It certainly hadn't happened there.

Bus and I amused ourselves for a while by quietly counting the ubiquitous black-and-white Jersey cows along the country roads that led across the Ohio-Michigan border. When that no longer held our interest, we played license plate games. As small children, we learned to spot the alphabet letters in order, and then from Z back to A when we were a little older. Once we

both were readers, we vied for points for each state's license plate we could identify, squabbling quietly over who saw the state first. We counted large red barns, some newly painted and others in sad need of new color, and tall, round brick or wooden silos that Mom told us were for storing corn and grain. In fact, we eventually made a game of counting nearly every sort of farm building and equipment along the way. There were no prizes except for bragging rights for the winner, quietly so as not to rile my father.

Just about the time we'd run out of games and the fidgets took over, we finally drove into Adrian's quiet, tree-lined streets. Tall American elms and huge old oaks dominated, shading the summer streets and sidewalks with their leafy arching branches. Bus and I sat up straight in our seats, craning our necks to spot the corner where we turned, trying to be the first to say excitedly, "There's *Gramma* and *Grampa*'s house!" As soon as I learned to read numbers I announced proudly that they lived at three-one-nine East Butler Street.

The modest house, probably built in the early 1900s, its wood siding in sorry need of paint, had a small front porch up two steps from the short cement walk that led from the sidewalk. A wood railing surrounded the porch and the floorboards creaked as we stepped on them, warped and weathered as they were by time and the rains and snows that visited the whole Midwest every year.

Gramma Bayles had heard us coming and held the screen door wide for us to come in. A quiet woman, slightly plump and wearing her characteristic flowered cotton housedress with an apron over it, her deep-set brown eyes still managed to reveal an inner spark. I can remember only one hairdo for Gramma, her straight, fine hair tightly pulled back into a bun at her nape. The only jewelry I ever saw her wear was one or another of her costume jewelry brooches, set with glass "jewels," pinned below her collar.

Grampa Bayles was either in the backyard or sitting in his favorite chair in the living room. Gramma usually sat next to him, with a small table in between that held whatever they had been reading.

We kids had our instructions and we dutifully kissed each grandparent. Gramma's cheek was as soft as powdered sugar and smelled of vanilla. I didn't mind kissing her at all. But kissing Grampa was a scratchy experience; he had whisker bristles from not shaving well.

We kids were fascinated by one of Grampa's behaviors. He had an undiagnosed hand tremor that caused his fingernails to rake across the right knee of his usual "uniform," heavy work overalls of dark denim or twill, until he wore a hole in them. Grandma had to patch every pair, neatly layering another piece of sturdy fabric over the worn spot. I can still hear her saying, "If you'd trim your nails, Clarence, maybe you wouldn't make holes," but Grampa just grinned.

Grampa endeared himself to us kids in many ways, even if he wasn't so kissable. He took us down somewhat rickety outside stairs to the backyard that dropped lower than the front yard because the house was built on a slope. Then, he led us to the left, alongside the house, where he lifted the heavy, slanting cold cellar door that hid a tiny, dark, cave-like room beneath the house. There he showed us the bounty he'd grown in his garden beyond the back steps, baskets of potatoes, carrots, onions, parsnips, of red apples, green apples, squash, pumpkins, and vegetables that were strange to me. It all smelled of earth, damp and intriguing.

We were allowed to choose an apple each, take it to the pump to be held under the spigot while Grampa pumped the handle up and down until icy cold well water spilled out, even in summer's heat. "Watch out for worms," he'd say, eyes twinkling. We never saw a single worm in Grampa's apples.

Sometimes we had dinner at our grandparents' house, a noontime meal, the custom back then when women didn't work outside the home and farmers came in hungry from their morning chores. Gramma cooked almost all meals on a wood-burning stove, a black cast iron behemoth with about six burners and a stovepipe that rose through the ceiling and emerged on the roof. Even after Grampa bought her a gas range, she was so accustomed to cooking on that old stove, she ignored the shiny new appliance and still cooked on the one she knew so well.

When it was almost time to eat, Mom and Gramma covered the big oak table with the tablecloth made from a cotton bed sheet that my great-grandmother had embroidered with multicolored daisy chains.

"Go wash your hands!" Mom said and we didn't need to be told twice because it meant we could pump water from the well into the kitchen sink just as Grampa had done in the backyard.

Grandpa's hand washing, in contrast, involved barely inserting the tips of his fingers into the water, a token touch of the cake of soap and a quick swipe under the stream of water. Grandma's fits about the dirt on the towel, were a family joke, out of her earshot, of course. I can still hear her calling him "you old fool" and the smile flickering at the corners of her mouth let us know she was teasing.

When we were old enough we were permitted to help set the table. That meant going into the pantry where the dishes were kept, an unmatched assortment of translucent colored and clear glass plates, cups and saucers. I now know they were from the dime store or came as a bonus in boxes of laundry powder, but as far as I was concerned back then, they were precious cut glass because they sparkled in the sunlight that streamed through the lace curtains by the dining table. I'll bet Gramma would laugh if she knew that those same dime store dishes are now collectibles, costing as much as \$10 each or more.

The only part of dinner I remember was dessert and I always had my hopes up for a piece of Gramma's pies. Never since my childhood have I ever heard of grape skin pie but that was Gramma's clever way of making use of everything edible, even if it meant hard or time-consuming work. Every year, on vines in the backyard grew fat bunches of deep blue Concord grapes that Gramma made into jelly. That involved boiling the grapes, then pressing them through a fine sieve to extract their juice for the jelly. Most people threw both seeds and skins away. Not Gramma! I'm not sure how she separated the useless seeds from the skins. What I do know is that she used those skins to make pies to serve fresh from the oven, the top crust golden brown, steam rising from the slit vents.

But my favorite even to this day is gooseberry pie. That, too, came from backyard bounty, a very productive bush by the foot of the back steps. It was Grampa's job to pick the gooseberries because Gramma said, "Clarence, if you want pie you're going to have to get the gooseberries yourself. I'm done getting my hands scratched on those thorns!"

After dinner my brother and I had permission to play the pump organ. To enter the parlor we had to maneuver the folding wooden door and we could always depend on hearing, "Don't pinch your fingers!"

The parlor was always chilly, it seemed, even on hot summer days. It was kept closed almost all the time, seldom used except for certain occasions such as after a wedding, a baptism or a funeral. Bus and I knew it was a special privilege to enter there.

The old oak organ stood against the wall that divided the parlor from the living room. Since it loomed taller than we were, we were in awe of it and its little mirror-backed shelves that held small, framed portraits, a vase of strawflowers, and other knickknacks, protected by carved wooden openwork “fences” to keep them from tumbling. Across the top, decorative scrollwork of carved wood served as its crowning glory. But the magic part was the lid that revealed a keyboard beneath it, and above the lid a series of round handles called “stops” to pull and thus produce different sounds from the organ when certain keys were pressed..

Bus and I took turns sitting in the chair, gripping the wood below the keyboard so as not to fall off, pumping the foot bellows as hard as we could, sending air through the organ’s internal parts. The other one pressed keys and out wheezed sound. I cannot call it melodious because neither of us had any discernible musical talent. Instead, what we produced was great fun and an escalating series of giggles. We got away with the racket as long as we could until we either drove the grownups crazy or our fingers were so cold we couldn’t play anyhow.

When it came time to head back to Toledo, we performed cheek-kissing again to thank Gramma and Grampa for the good visit. Bus and I were sure to fall asleep in the back seat of the car, dreaming of gooseberry pies and the wheezy pump organ on the long ride home.

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