



Grandma Does His Duty

The hilarious memoir of a '50s American misfit

paul j. pfarr

WHAT OTHERS SAY ABOUT GRANDMA

“...a fresh and intriguing voice as a storyteller...”

- Alison Kilian, Lobster Press

“...a delightful voice...”

- Judy Klein, Kleinworks

“...a fabulous style of writing...”

- Catherine Courtade, Pantheon Books

“...a great ear and rhythm for humor and storytelling...”

- Judy Mikalonis, Andrea Hurst and Associates Literary Management

GRANDMA DOES HIS DUTY

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DISCLAIMER

Nearly all of the events in this book are true, to the best of my recollection, and most of the names are real. Like a painter, I have occasionally rearranged the details for more realistic effect.

These happenings took place some 50 years ago. At that time, there were many attitudes, perceptions and stereotypes that we no longer accept today. While I have included them where they relate to the stories, I do not endorse them in any way.

Likewise, I have changed my own behavior and perceptions over the course of a lifetime, like my old acquaintances whose youthful exploits are told here.

P. J. P.



Chapter XII.

Home on the Range

In the 1880s, when our house was built, door-trim was made better. It never fell off, and only creaked a little after many years of abuse. Using the doorframe for exercise was a habit of long standing with Nick, Gregory and me, and even Peter joined up, much later. The ledge at the top was only $\frac{3}{4}$ " deep, and made chin-ups and leg-lifts tortuous, but all the better! No one complained – we just suffered in silence.

This particular morning, I had just eaten breakfast, and was hanging around the kitchen (literally), awaiting developments, or planning to cause them if none appeared. One exercise was swinging on the doorframe by my fingertips; another was jumping up and touching the nine-foot ceiling. The audience at the kitchen table was captive, able to witness (but hopefully not duplicate) any new records set. But what really mattered was to devote any spare moments to keeping in shape.

One of my objectives was to ferret out anyone who had lapsed from the “get tough, be tough, stay tough” religion, and I was beginning to have some trouble with Greg. He had arrived at that tricky age where he sometimes criticized my displays as immature, when he wasn’t engaged in them himself.

Before breakfast, I had discovered that my fanatically grown patch of black raspberries was loaded with ripe fruit. They needed picking and freezing *now*, and we had to have black raspberry pie! I hoped to enlist help, to get the work done in a reasonable amount of time. Nick and Greg could be counted on, but Peter wouldn’t do much, unless perpetually flogged.

Well, Mother would bake the pies, but wasn’t going to make Peter work. (Maybe we’d worn her out on discipline by the time she came to him.) I had fumed and

wrestled to make Peter help out so many times during my high school years—just to share equally in ordinary chores like cleaning out the garage, picking berries, mowing the lawn, scrubbing and waxing the kitchen floor, or cleaning the bathroom. But it was like trying to use a piece of cooked spaghetti as a threshing-stick, or molding water into a leverage tool. The Industrial Revolution proved it *could* be done, but it's too big a project to be practical at home, so I settled for revenge.

There was something about Peter that stimulated my imagination – the possibilities included whippings and fasting, or at least an upset stomach for undeserved, un-worked-for dinners and living provided. It was the reason I sometimes set him up for my own misdeeds. (You know how it is – technically, you know it's wrong, but in your heart, you also know he really deserves it. *Yes! Yes!* You exult to yourself as the switch goes up and down...)

But never mind, I told myself – *this time* he would do his part, or suffer the consequences!

I watched Nick eating breakfast. Good old Nick! – helpful and sturdy, even though he did seem almost middle-aged to me. Whenever I saw people going about their business quietly, just being good, I thought they needed stirring up, or at least poking a little. Why, they were almost *dead!*

But Nick was always there as a good companion, or ready to lend a helping hand, inside or out. He did what he was asked, without making a nuisance of himself, while I couldn't accept the commonplace, and made heavy work over small household tasks like the dishes. Or if I did agree to help, it was hard to pull me away from the task when it was time to quit: after doing the dishes, I would then proceed to clean the stove, the refrigerator, the floor, etc. Hard to start, hard to stop.

My attention was riveted by Peter at the table, idly adding spoonful after spoonful of sugar to his bowl of cereal, without stirring it up. Then he tasted it, and started to add more. I couldn't let that go. “Look at that! You always waste sugar! You're going to end up with a lot of extra sugar in the bottom of that bowl, if you don't stir it!”

Peter returned a weak, noncommittal smile, and continued what he was doing.

This drove me to action. “Mix it up, dummy! *You have to mix it up!*” I forcibly grabbed his hand. “Stir! Stir! Like this! Then you won't have to put so much in!”

But Peter didn't listen and wouldn't stir, and I almost smacked him on the back

of the head. My mother said nothing... She was busy making some preparations for the next meal of the day. Part of my vehemence was to induce her intervention, but it didn't work.

Now my father entered the kitchen, looking disheveled and out-of-sorts, as usual before breakfast. *Food! Food! I want food!* His demeanor cried out.

Unfortunately, he arrived just as Peter had finished his cereal, and exploded when he saw the mound of sugar in the bottom of the bowl. (*Thank you, God!*) Generically addressing those present, my father spewed bitter accusations: "Look at that waste! I don't know why I bother to work... You stupid kids waste food. I might as well throw my money away!"

I tried to refocus attention on the offender by pointing out that the bowl belonged singly to Peter, but, for some reason, this didn't do the trick, nor did it assuage my father's temper. While my mother prepared his breakfast, he continued to expound on the various shortcomings of the household in general: his hammer was missing, and someone had ruined a paintbrush. (He had usually misplaced them himself, but always thought it was the kids. Sometimes it was true...) He still referred to us as "kids," even though all of us (except Peter) were in high school, and taller than our father.

Mother was still silent, not wishing to begin the day with futile wrangling.

Nicholas, meanwhile, had decamped, having nothing to contribute (by desire or nature) to the kitchen scene, and was now at the piano in the living room, doodling away at some assignment of Mother's. My ears were offended, and it didn't take me long to say so. "What a dumb exercise! Boring pieces like that would force a music-lover to quit!"

Mother had nothing to say, since she had assigned it, but I intended to put a flea in Nicky's ear privately. It might help him, especially if he planned a musical career.

My father was calming down. Sugar had entered the bloodstream, and would presently reach the brain. All would be well if he didn't see something in the paper to set him off again. But we were not so fortunate. He began to rustle his paper angrily, and started to animadvert through clenched teeth about "crooked GOPs," bankers, and Rockefeller, some of his favorite targets. After a minute or two, he wound down.

Enter my brother Gregory. By special arrangement, a famous sports commentator is here to tell the story.

“Hello, folks! This is Howard Martell, live with today’s breakfast-cast! We’re expecting a really good show today... and I see that Greg is already on the field, warming up. I’ve got to say, he sure looks hungry! Now he’s moving toward the starting line, and I think he’s getting ready to launch his breakfast – Yes! He’s getting into the stove drawer, and making quite a din with those pots and pans, folks! I see that the dog Sam is playing goalie under the kitchen table. We know he’s one of those calm players, but he’s beginning to get nervous now that the star player is in position. Greg makes his choice, slams the cast-iron skillet on the stove, grabs the eggs and margarine, and starts breaking them into the skillet. Boy, those eggs are being fried at a furious rate!

“Everything’s pretty quiet on the field – he has a clear shot. It won’t be long now before those eggs are done, folks! Hey, they’re ready! He grabs a plate in his left hand, a turner in his right! He’s dividing them up! He chases them around the skillet with a turner! Uh-oh! One is escaping over the side of the skillet! He counters with his turner! He misses! He abandons the turner! The egg continues its slide down the stove-front, but he’s close on it, trying to scoop it with his plate! He’s almost got it! Now he’s on his knees! He makes one – last – lunge – and scoops the egg onto the plate! He’s got it, folks! Wow, what a play! But wait – there’s too much momentum – he’s STILL GOING, under the table, on all-fours! And the eggs are served up right under the goalie’s nose! That dog is looking hard at the plate. Was there a foul? No – but I’ll bet Sam’s never seen service like that!”

“You heard it here first, ladies and gentlemen! This is Howard Martell, signing off!”

At this finely tuned moment, Ruth Moore, a local schoolteacher and friend of Mother’s, arrived to witness what appeared to be the last act of a three-ring circus: Greg on all fours proffering a plate of eggs to the dog.

Ruth remarked acerbically, “We wouldn’t feed good food like that to *our* dogs at home, I can tell you!”

After Greg gobbled his breakfast, I asked all my brothers for help in picking the black raspberries, and everyone agreed (even Peter!) I knew he’d make a feint at it, if only to get some work-credit in a bankrupt bank (a veritable politician’s move – he would think it wasn’t whether you *worked* or not, but whether the right people [parents] *thought* you’d worked.)

Soon we were all in the berry patch, where a cool breeze played through the thin shade of locust trees. We all knew the rules of picking: begin at one end, and go through systematically to the other, making sure that every bush is picked clean before moving on. The berries were huge, and the bushes were loaded! We were picking as fast as we could with both hands, the buckets strapped to our belts. (Well... not Peter’s. He couldn’t bear the idea of doubling the work by using both

hands.)

Silence prevailed for five minutes or so, except for my ongoing commentary on the berries. “Wow! Look at these berries!”

Every time I said it, Greg grew more annoyed, but I didn’t notice. In my own private forge-ahead world, little attention was paid to other people’s expressions.

Pretty soon, though, I saw Peter in the center of the patch, lazily picking a bush. “Hey, get back here, egghead!” I yelled.

This appellation was not a compliment to Peter’s brainpower, but an expression reaching back to our cribs. Our oldest brother, Timmy, had derisively dubbed us all eggheads at some point, starting with Gregory, to make sure we knew our places. This brotherly endearment was usually accompanied by a dope slap and a sound like a spring unwinding, made by the perpetrator: “*Do-ing-erl-erl-erl!*”



My mother recently confided that, one day, Timmy had spied Peter, Nicky, and me walking out our lane, and been moved to say lugubriously, in a rare moment of brotherly affection, “There goes a head, an egg, and a pig.” Mother didn’t inquire further – she was a little surprised at this effusiveness.

In continuing to use the term *egghead*, we were just keeping the tradition alive, and, uh... “doing to others what had been done to us.” Peter being the youngest, we felt that he represented the shallow end of the gene-pool, and had a lot to answer for. Years earlier, Greg and I had made a discovery: from aloft in a tree, we couldn’t see Peter’s body while looking straight down at him, but only a head with two feet sticking out.

“Wow! Look at the size of that head!” Greg had marveled, his voice tinged with awe and pride. For some reason (and to our delight), nature had authorized the growth of his head beyond that of his body. If that weren’t enough, he had another peculiarity: his hair grew at an indecent rate, which, of course, only increased the head’s apparent size.

With rare rapport, we proclaimed Peter “Head” on the spot.

And Peter’s head always figured in events. When he was five, he had crowned himself “King Peter” with a conical kitchen ricer, and it got stuck. My mother first tried putting butter on his head, to slip the ricer off, but every time she pulled, Peter was lifted off the ground.

My father was at work, so we called Uncle Lou, who lived next door at the time, and he brought his hacksaw. Being a barber, when he first saw Peter's predicament, he remarked regretfully that it was too bad he couldn't shave his head first - the crown would be easier to get off.

Peter saw the hacksaw coming, and started screaming in earnest. I think he was afraid they were going to try to save the ricer at his expense. He bolted, but the escaped monarch was brought to earth on the front porch, and forcibly (but painlessly) divested of his crown, after a nerve-wracking 20 minutes or so of screaming.

This sort of thing seemed only natural, for him. Another time, he got an aspirin bottle stuck on his finger (it wouldn't fit on his head), and we prevailed on Uncle Lou again...

* * *

Back in the berry patch, I shouted, "Hey, get back here, egghead! You don't start in the center of the patch! If we all wandered around like you, we'd miss half the berries. If you can't do something right, it's better not to do it at all!" Peter looked hopeful at this, and I instantly recognized my mistake. "Forget it! You're not going anywhere! Just do it RIGHT!"

Then I spotted several bushes Peter had picked before me. "Look at *that!* Do you call that picking? You idiot! You only picked them off the top! Just to show you how many berries you missed, I'm going to pick them again."

Five minutes later, I showed him the full bucket I had picked after him. He didn't seem impressed, and I considered making some tattoos on him where they wouldn't be seen. The three of us managed to herd him back to the berry-picking line. Five more minutes went by. I looked around, and he was gone!

"Where's Peter?" I asked Nick.

"He mumbled something about going to the bathroom."

I set my mental clock for two minutes, in expectation of his return. Normally, I would really have been enjoying myself by now in this natural heaven, but a sinner was jogging my aesthetic elbow continually, and I was getting irritated, just like the Lord.

"I'll be back," I told Gregory grimly. "I'm going weasel-hunting!" Greg only grinned.

Peter was nowhere in the vicinity of the bathroom. *Well, he's not in the house, I*

thought, *so let's check around outside*. Not there, either, at least not in any of the obvious places. Then I heard strange noises coming from the basement, and crept down the outside steps. What did I see? A *weasel* with a contorted face, holding a contraband transistor radio near his ear. Worse yet, he was listening to WSAI, a local pop station!

I was too outraged to be ashamed of him. In our family, this was betrayal. You didn't smoke, drink, or swear. You ate only organic food (in theory, if not always in practice), and listened only to the finest classical music. (Well, my two sisters broke all of these rules, but they didn't count.)

I exploded at him. "I can't *believe* you are listening to that trash! You're not only a lousy worker, but you don't keep your word!"

Peter's vague, ingrown smile demurred, *Oh, but I didn't give my word, Your Honor...*

"Furthermore," I continued, ignoring that, "let me tell you, if you listen to music like that, you'll go straight to hell! It will corrupt the mind by tickling the ears, and then you'll be on the Devil's choice list. No one thinks the fires of hell are real, but we *all* die!"

Peter read my purpose, and fled upstairs, where he tried to hide behind Mother's skirts. I reported his crimes in detail, and appealed to her to enact the parental laws as old as time. Something had to be done.

But she made it clear that nothing was going to be done. *She* hadn't assigned the berry-picking. Deeply perturbed, I left, but gradually consoled myself with the cheering thought: *One serving of revenge coming up for the weasel!*

All this had taken only 15 minutes from my berry-picking, so I returned to the patch, and we picked 50 quarts of the finest black raspberries I've ever seen.

Now it was lunchtime, just the opportunity I needed. I offered to fix it (which was suspicious, in itself, since I didn't volunteer for domestic jobs). First I made several cans of tomato soup, then some chicken sandwiches, and liberally topped them both off with black pepper. Our Petrov was a finicky eater. Everyone else would eat the food, but Petrov would push his away, after a spoonful or two, whereupon I would eat his portion. It worked just as I planned. *But oh, what a paltry revenge*, I thought. *Not nearly good enough.*

When lunch was over, I generously made chocolate milkshakes, using extra chocolate, vanilla ice cream, and maraschino cherry juice. Finally, I blended a generous dose of "ExLax," and added it to the unregenerate varmint's drink.

After lunch, I froze all the black raspberries, saving out plenty for pies. Peter spent his afternoon in a small room that used to be the pantry in Grandmother's time, but now contained the necessary apparatus for his condition... a commode.

When I passed by the closed bathroom door, I whispered fiercely into the keyhole: "*Sinner!*"

Mother, sewing nearby on the dining-room table, looked up, slightly startled and puzzled by this epithet, since she knew I wasn't gratuitously mean. She said: "Aren't you being a bit hard on your brother?"

"Oh, no - not hard *enough!* But we're getting there!" I replied light-heartedly, leaving by the front door.

WHO WILL LOVE GRANDMA?

- fans of Mark Twain, Garrison Keillor or Forrest Gump
- 'boomers paroled from public or Catholic school
- lovers of Americana
 - '50s and '60s country people
- **AND ANYONE ELSE WHO JUST ENJOYS A FUNNY BOOK!**

Grandma Does His Duty is a classic of American storytelling, with that timeless feeling of Tom Sawyer and Lake Wobegon. It's a funny kaleidoscope-view of a vanished time – always unexpected.

Growing up in '50s Ohio, Paul experiences his world largely through the past and fantasy – to him, Indians, frontier living and Robin Hood are reality. He is intrinsically opposed to the modern world, and his twin penchants for peculiar logic and mischief spark outrageous events from grade school on.

While everyone else is drumming the modern tune, the older Paul increasingly displays his eccentric core, developing an unorthodox Code and ingenious stratagems to protect himself from the world's insidious incursions.

“My most elaborate plan for dealing with punks never had to be used, but I came close one January with Lenny Totterhouse. We were to run six miles up the railroad (after swimming the icy creek), following up with my usual workout of rope-climbing, pushups, sit-ups, and hanging by the neck... We would make a glorious end with the fight, if he made it through the hanging.”

– Chapter XIV, “Modus Operandi”

This is a highly individual memoir, written intensely in the first person, beginning when Paul is six with the title story, and ending with his first year of college. His relentless habit of standing ideas on their heads catches the unwary reader off-balance, and the book definitely has an odd kick to its gallop, yet it's ingenuous as Forrest Gump.

Humor is everywhere, sometimes forthright and sometimes subtle, and the use of words adds a distinctive dimension. It's surprisingly literary, but comfortable to read.

The slow-paced rhythms of a small town and country living recall Garrison Keillor. For baby-boomers, it will unlock memories of a time when kids could still roam their world freely, though school was ruled with the teacher's iron fist!

While you are occupied with Paul's utterly sincere gyrations, the atmosphere is quietly working its way irretrievably into your heart. GRANDMA is a classic for all ages, with the all-pervading background of the American experience.



Wild for an opera career, Paul Pfarr won a voice scholarship at 18 to the Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music. He was caught there by his wife Justice (Molly!) (still in captivity), caught by the Army during the Vietnam War (paroled), and caught by the back-to-the-land movement in the 1970s (exorcised).

With Justice, he wrote Build Your Own Log Cabin, Winchester Press, 1978. Suspect has two computer-related degrees, and is webmaster of <http://www.choosing-natural-health.com>. But writing, especially humor, seems necessary to keep him away from the cliff. Paul is still not a joiner, but no longer hangs himself by the neck (even by request).