

A Unique Gift from a Unique Heart

By Kelley Delano

As the holidays draw nearer to us once again, our thoughts naturally turn to nativity scenes, gifts, angels, smiling children, dill pickles...

Dill pickles?

Doesn't quite fit the theme? Let me explain...

My maternal Grandfather was what you might call 'unique.' Those that knew him would tell you about his unrelenting energy and zest for life. We never called him Grampy. All I can ever remember calling him was Dadoo. How he got that nickname is a story for another time, but let's just say that it fit him.

My grandmother always said he was going through his second childhood with us grandkids. I'm not so sure he ever grew out of his first. We didn't think of him so much like a grandfather, but more like a playmate.

When the grandkids would go out in front of his house playing catch, it wouldn't be long until the neighbor across the street would be calling him, telling him we were going to hit her windows. So, he would come out, and just to bug her I think, he would start tossing the ball around with us. And by the way Mrs. Wrigley, we never did come close to your windows.

In the summer, he'd help us make go-carts, and spend hours pitching horseshoes and trying to teach us all how to do it. In the winter, he made us a sled out of an old fridge door, the kind with the rounded corners. We could fit six kids on that thing. A slight hill and a good crust, and that old door was greased lightning.

And no matter what the season, when we got out of his sight for too long, he'd lift two fingers to his mouth for that ear-splitting whistle that let us know it was time to come home. You could hear it for a mile.

He was a self-taught musician. Some of my fondest memories are of sitting in my grandparents' kitchen in the midst of a family gathering and listening to Dadoo playing the harmonica. He could never read a note of music, but played by ear instead. I still have one of his old harmonicas safely tucked away.

He was very sentimental, especially around the holidays, and was more emotional than most that knew him would have guessed. He wrote poems for almost every family member. He cried when loved ones passed on, and when new little ones arrived. And he was the first standing and applauding whenever any of us did well.

His energy was boundless, or so it seemed. He loved to skate, and I can still remember the village boys trying to catch him on the ice. It wasn't easy. And at the tender age of thirteen, I

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had the honor of skating on my grandfather's arm to a live band at the town rink. That also wasn't easy, but he had infinite patience as a teacher. He was in his seventies at the time.

So what does any of this have to do with dill pickles? I'm getting to that.

The Christmas I was eight was like most others, sitting around the tree with my family opening presents. Until I got to one big box with my name on it. The tag said simply, "Love, Santa." I unwrapped it to find an old boot box stuffed with newspaper. Rooting through the crumpled paper, I found my gift. A large bottle of dill pickles. Certainly, the most unusual Christmas gift I'd ever received.

Later that morning, I picked up the phone to hear "Jingle Bells" being played merrily on the harmonica on the other end. He did that every Christmas.

"Merry Christmas, Dadoo," I said. "Thanks for the dill pickles." He just laughed.

Later, after all the excitement settled down, I asked him why the unusual gift choice. He explained to me that as a very small child, one of my favorite treats were the large dill pickles that he and my parents would buy for me from the local store. He said I'd make the most terrible faces because of the sour vinegar, but I'd come right back for more. He told me that ever since, every time he saw a bottle of dill pickles, he'd think of me making those faces. He gave me the pickles because it made him smile when he thought of that.

We lost Dadoo to cancer just before my sixteenth birthday. He left a very large hole in the fabric of our family, and I wish for all of the world that my children could have known him. But I share my memories of him with them whenever I can, and they've come to know him through me. I loved him dearly and still miss him terribly, especially around this time of the year.

My Christmas wish for you all is that you have someone as special as Dadoo in your life, even if it's only for a little while.

And on my holiday table, right next to the turkey's place of honor, you'll find my dill pickles.

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