



Chapter Three

THE GIFT

1 Corinthians 7: 7

But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift; another has that.

DAWN OF DAY

As the light of day softly streamed through the window and playfully danced with the shadows on the ceiling above the wicker crib that held the infant Dick O'Neill Du Puis, all seemed perfect in his little world. Soon, just like every other day, he would be awakened with a sweet kiss from his adoring mother as her familiar scent fragrantly filled the room. Thus, this was the pattern of each ambrosial morning that continued until Dick became a curious active little boy. Then, with senses totally captivated by the fragrant essences of the Bayou, he would excitedly bound out of bed anxious to make an intimate acquaintance with the moods and manners of the world in which he lived. Even at an early age, it was evident this little boy was about his Father's business committing the days of his youth to memory. Without his knowledge, he was building a pallet of textures and colors that would propel his mind into a creative whirl, which would later be labeled as a gift from his Creator. Due to his innate spirit of adventure, he could be seen walking all over the property that belonged to both his grandfathers, curiously observing the shiny liquid greenness of each blade and leaf.

LIFE WITH THE GRANDFATHERS

In spite of the differences and animosity that existed between Dick's grandfathers, they both were astute enough to never allow their feelings toward one another to flow into their grandson's little heart. Although Dick lived with his parents under Grandfather O'Neill's roof, he recalls distinctly walking by himself to see his Grandfather Trahan at the early age of four.

Grandfather Trahan loved Dick with such passion that he wanted to scoop his grandson up in his arms and hold him lovingly on his lap. Unfortunately, Dick remembers his grandfather having such an enormous belly that there was absolutely no room for sitting. Although they

tried this routine repeatedly, his grandson would roll right off onto the floor every time. However, this challenge did not put a damper on Grandfather Trahan when showing affection toward Dick. His solution was to scoop Dick up and raise him to eye level in order to plant a juicy kiss on his cheeks.

Even at age 80, Dick can still describe every room of his Grandfather Trahan's home with amazing clarity. His grandfather knew exactly what he wanted and had designed every feature of his home down to each intricate detail. The dining area was an octagonal shaped room with transom windows around the entire perimeter that acted as natural air conditioning. The table was in the shape of an enormous lazy Susan with place settings on the bottom level, followed by serving dishes on the second tier and crowned royally with a beautiful centerpiece on the top. Dick humorously remembers his Grandfather Trahan sitting like a king at the table and powerfully serving the meat as if performing an official duty to each member of the family. In addition, he fluently conversed in both French and English even though Dick's grandmother only spoke French.

In contrast, Dick's Grandfather O'Neill's home was a very large and elegant dwelling that was decorated with furniture imported from France. It was also known to contain the only organ in the town of Gueydan. Since the house was two stories and divided by a single hallway, the right side of the structure had been converted into a court house where his grandfather, Judge O'Neill, held trials. The left side resembled an apartment where the entire O'Neill family lived. The top floor of the home served as the location for the Gueydan Catholic Church. Grandfather O'Neill's blacksmith shop was in a building just outside the house which allowed him the ability to have two careers going simultaneously. Given the fact his Grandfather held a prominent position in the community both English and only "proper" French were spoken in the home.

HOUSE KEEPING

Dick remembers his mother running a very neat and orderly household. In the summer time, she would pull the moss out of the trees, wash it and let it dry. It would then be used in stuffing the mattresses for the hottest season because the air would flow freely through the material causing a cooling affect. However, during the wintertime, the chicken and wild duck feathers were plucked and saved in paper bags. When an ample supply had been collected, they were used for making pillows and quilts for beds. Sometimes, enough feathers had been collected to fill an entire mattress.

Since the floors were not varnished, Dick's mother would grind a red brick into a very fine powder that she would then rub into the floor, creating a beautiful rose patina which Dick described as warm and elegant.

Outside, the O'Neill home was surrounded by a fragrant gardenia hedge that also provided beautiful bouquets for the family and favorite teachers as well. One of Dick's favorite spots to play was in the giant oak tree in the front of the yard. Since it had been planted when his dad was born, its branches were so large that his mother would hoist him up just so he could walk at ease amongst them.

Another chore for his mother to perform daily was sweeping the ground around the front and back doors. Since the ground was so firmly packed, it resembled a hard wooden surface that was kept free of leaves and debris. One of Dick's favorite past times was to poke small sticks down the holes that could be found here and there that provided homes for large bugs. He would get a kick out of the bug flipping the stick right back at him in due time.

MANNERS ABOUND

One very important value taught in the O'Neil home was the importance of having manners. It took only one lesson for Dick to commit the behavior of practicing manners to his memory forever. As a young boy, he enjoyed immensely assisting his Grandfather O'Neill with his blacksmith work. His favorite job was to turn the wheel causing the fan to make the coals hot. Judge O'Neill allowed Dick this pleasure as long as he remembered his manners. Unfortunately, forgetting this one day and interrupting a conversation between his grandfather and his mother, he received a clunk on the head from his grandfather's thumb that caused an egg sized bump. Enough! Lesson learned!

GIFT EMMERGES

During the summer, when Dick's nap time was scheduled, his mother would place a soft pallet on the wooden floor that had been freshly mopped with cold water. The afternoon breezes would blow across the moist floor producing a cooling effect in the room. Since Dick needed help with drifting off into sleep, his mother would rest beside him and ask him to close his eyes and tell her what he was thinking. He would reply, "I am "lookin" at pictures. I see a pretty white horse and a beautiful rose that is red with velvet petals." As he continued to speak to his mother the objects in his mind would be described in complete Technicolor; alarming her so greatly that she contacted a physician. Lacking the ability to visualize, she was certain something was wrong with her little boy. During the conference with the physician, she exclaimed, "Something is wrong with my Sonny, because he is seeing things!" However, she went home with the assurance that it was perfectly normal for her little boy to be seeing things.

Although Grandfather O'Neill was a widower when Dick's family first lived with him, he soon married a lady that rapidly became everyone's favorite. Dick enjoyed watching his new grandmother make door stops out of catalogues by folding every page until it was shaped like

a fan. This fan shaped catalogue then became a decorative way to keep the doors open. However, to the family's surprise, what 5 year old Dick was really focusing on was the pages containing the pictures of the models wearing women's clothing. Finally, he asked if he could have these particular pages and placed them in a large orderly stack. Then carefully studying the pictures, he used his little scissors to cut off the arms, legs and heads of the models, leaving only the garments they had been wearing. This little 5 year old boy was already tuning into his dream of being a designer of women's clothing. Later, when Dick had established his career in the clothing design industry, his mother confessed to him how worried she had been when this incident occurred, fearing he had deeply seeded psychological issues.

THE GREAT DEPRESSION STRIKES

From 1929-1940 when The Great Depression created hard times throughout the world; it showed no favoritism to anyone. Thus, Dick recalls with sadness how, during these horrible economic times, his Grandfather O'Neill lost all his money. Thus, having no income, his beautiful home went into a hopeless state of deterioration. Additionally, when the Gueydan flood of 1940 took place, the elegant French furniture on the ground floor of his dwelling was totally destroyed.

On the other hand, Grandfather Trahan during this time always seemed to be without financial issues. Since his main source of income was from his farm machinery company, Dick never figured out how he stayed so solvent.

Thus, it was during this time that Dick's father, a professional welder, moved the family to different locations in order to find work. Unfortunately, his dad's love for having a good time severely affected the whole family. Possessing a personality as big as life itself, his standards were very different when it came to handling money. He simply did not provide the funds necessary for running a household. Instead, he would blow it on a big car or use it to buy drinks for everyone at the bar.

Also, at this point, two sisters had been born making it necessary for the family to now find a permanent dwelling. Consequently, Dick's family settled into a very small home located directly across from the Gueydan School. It was at this time that Dick O'Neill Du Puis would know what real hardship was all about. He was a little boy who would grow up very fast due to the curves life would now throw his way; a learning experience that would be training for coping with tragedy in his adult years as a father.



(Dick, age 1, ready for Mardi gras)



(Dick, age 4 with his sister)

(Dick with his sister and father below)



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(Dick's father in newspaper article about his work on the pipe line as a welder)

'The Big Inch'

German submarines along the U.S. coast forced the construction of the War Emergency Pipeline, often referred to as "The Big Inch," said J.G. "Frenchie" O'Neal of Chauvin. The 24-inch gas pipeline ran 1,800 miles from Longview, Texas to Elizabeth, N.J. and was the longest and largest pipeline ever constructed until then, O'Neal said. O'Neal, a welder on the job, stands on Chestnut Ridge, Penn.

(Grandfather O'Neill's wedding picture)

