

# Caught Between Two Families

A 14-year-old daughter, her disfellowshipped father, and her grandparents working at G.C. headquarters, converge at the 1966 General Conference Session.

by Deborah Anfenson-Vance

THE SUMMER AFTER THE SCHOOL YEAR OF my attempt at salvation-by-hemline, our family flew from Los Angeles to Detroit for General Conference. F. D. Nichol had just surprised everyone by dying ("He was doing so *well* last time I saw him," I overheard Grandpa telling Grandma), R. R. Figuhr was retiring, and so was my mother's father, reluctantly, at age 70.

Grandpa was the quintessential Adventist, a vigorous, disciplined man with a résumé that included 20 years as a "China hand" and a 16-year stint at the General Conference. Grandpa traveled the world for the Sabbath school department, introduced the Vacation Bible School concept to the Adventist Church, and even wrote a book, *Our Priceless Primaries*.

It all impressed me, particularly the book.

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When I was in third grade I memorized a poem from *Our Priceless Primaries* and recited it to my classmates, who must have been bewildered at the meaning of it all. Somewhere in the first stanza, the Sabbath school teacher "donned her hat one day." I did not know exactly what it meant to "don," but it struck me as a gesture of considerable panache, this woman grandly "donning" her hat to go forth and teach the children. Mother's subsequent definition, "to put on," seemed a bland and unwelcome substitute. One may put on a hat, or one may don it, and donning, I decided, was better. That was what I learned from *Our Priceless Primaries*.

Grandpa, who had no idea his book suffered such under-interpretation, and Grandma, an impeccable, reserved woman renowned for her lemon meringue pie, were to meet us at the Detroit airport. It was our first cross-country flight together as a family. Mother, who was already scared stiff to leave the ground, failed to fasten her seat belt and nearly hit the ceiling, by my father's account, when the plane took off. He chuckled when

he said it, and I thought maybe he exaggerated the actual event, but was never sure.

This was a strange trip for my father, a former Adventist. Whatever he thought about our family vacation, however, he kept to himself. Over the years he had kept many things to himself. But it is easier to hide facts than feelings, and I grew up aware of his bitterness toward Adventism and his perfectly Adventist in-laws, if not of the events that spawned the feelings. Regarding church trends, my father was a man ahead of his time, and it hurt him.

Few ministers were preaching grace when Daddy's local congregation disfellowshipped him for remarrying after a divorce. No one was making source-critical studies of the Spirit of Prophecy, or questioning its range of authority, when my dad told me he just couldn't buy into all this "Ellen White stuff." It was not yet fashionable to publicly air dirty church business or question the ethics of denominational leaders when my father began disburdening himself on the nepotism, inequity, and unprofessionalism he encountered working for the church organization in the late 1940s. My father had no credible community to support his contentions, so most of the time he kept them to himself. But the bitterness remained, stockpiled and waiting for the next fight with Mother or a smart

remark from one of his kids.

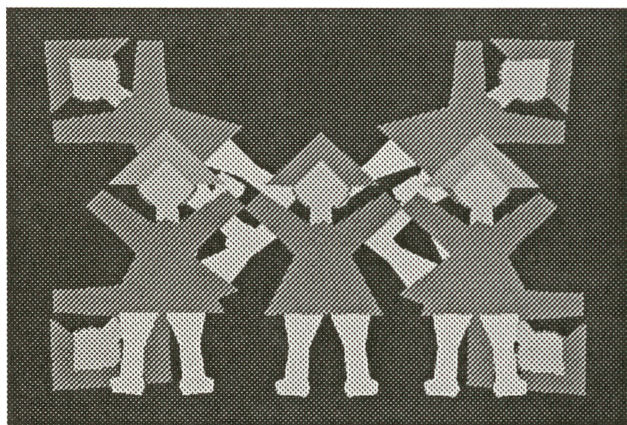
My mother and grandparents disapproved of so many of my father's attitudes and practices (once every two or three years, he knocked back a beer or two, and he watched the news on Friday night) that I found it convenient to follow suit, rejecting him as an authority on any matter of behavior or belief. One evening during prime time we argued loudly over whether I would exercise my God-given right to watch "The Monkees," and I lost. In my mind, my father's vendetta against long-haired rock musicians seemed of one piece with his intolerance for tithing and vegetarianism. I was not being disciplined, but persecuted.

But Daddy seemed comparatively docile on our flight to Detroit, unnaturally so, considering that for the next two weeks he would be steeped in institutional Adventism. Whatever he might have been thinking on that flight, it was unlikely that he would tell me, a recent eighth-grade graduate. Anyway, I had firmly attached myself to the headset in order to avoid listening to the plane engines, over which I worried as if I could do something about them. *The Swan of Tuonela*, Ravel's *Bolero*, and a Rimsky-Korsakov composition filled my head, effectively tuning out mechanical sounds and my sister, who had just finished sixth grade and knew everything, but nothing I wanted to hear. Dotsie was secular, like my dad. Much of my education in off-color jokes and four-letter words I owe to her.

After the classical program had cycled and recycled a half a dozen times, I removed the headsets and started bothering the stewardess. "How much longer till we land?" I asked. I thought we were pressing our luck to have stayed aloft as long as we had.

"We'll be landing in about two hours," she said. "Would you like some playing cards?"

I had not the dimmest idea what to do with playing cards, so I declined.



At the airport, Grandpa and Grandma picked us up in their white 1964 Ford. Ford was so much a part of our family I thought it was the Adventist way. Daddy had once strayed to a Pepto-Bismol-pink Rambler, but for the most part he had stuck with Ford-Mercury products. My grandparents, as far as I know, had never wavered. Whatever we thought of one another's religious views, we seemed to believe in the same cars; whatever I thought of my dad's character, I was proud of his stand on Fords. I recall once experiencing sweet fellowship on the playground with a classmate whose father bought a Galaxie 500.

Grandpa delivered us to a hotel somewhere near Cobo Hall in downtown Detroit. With all my heart I had been looking forward to Cobo Hall because our pastor's son would be there. This young man had literally swept me off my feet when we collided in the corridor outside my eighth-grade classroom.

"Are you all right?" he asked, in an unusually deep voice for boys of my age. No one had ever asked me that before, except my mother, and that didn't count. No, I was not all right. I was in sudden love, the way eighth-graders fall in love, which had nothing at all to do with love. This boy had always seemed indifferent to my heart's affection. Or maybe he didn't know. Anyway, I would show up at Cobo Hall, the only other person from our school, except for my sister, who was romantically irrelevant. He would see me isolated from the hoi polloi of our academy, a familiar young face in this crowd of grey, balding, burdened adults, and he would suddenly be struck with the blossoming beauty, intelligence, virtue, and charm I was not sure I possessed. But maybe he would see some-

thing I hadn't seen, and I would find at the 1966 General Conference the torrid, true love Audrey Hepburn and Cary Grant had found in *Roman Holiday*.

The event around which my suitcase packing had revolved took place sometime around the weekend. I ran into, this time not literally, the long-awaited boy, coming around the corner outside the main auditorium. Given his reputation back home, he couldn't have been very happy to be attending a General Conference. I said "Hi," and he said "Hi," and if he had said more I would not have known what to do. Such economy of vocabulary transformed Cobo Hall into a place holy with sightings and anticipation of more, though in

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fact there was only this one. I was able to stand with the adults in the main auditorium and sing the new song, "We Have This Hope," with unplanned fervency, feeling for the first time my heart burn-

ing, more with coming of age than of the Lord.

Not that the Lord failed to concern me. My heart had given him the nod too, but with fear, which to date was the most emotion I had been able to muster for God. For all their disavowal of the traditional Protestant hell, the Adventists had found equally effective ways to scare my soul into a desire for righteousness. Who needed "Sinners in the Hand of an Angry God" when Grandpa and Company were freely laying upon us times of trouble, lakes of fire, and investigative judgments? I did not understand how my grandfather could have himself photographed hugging koala bears in Australia, exchange silly jokes with Adlai Esteb, or relish one bite of Grandma's lemon meringue pie when all the danger of the cosmos hung over his head and every other human



head. I could only conclude that he, and most other Adventists, were far better people than I.

I was operating from this supposition when, Sabbath morning, I met Aunt Florence, one of Grandpa's Michigan relatives. She was a school-teacher and, I perceived, a fine, orthodox Adventist. In contrast to this excellent woman stood our family, a people living on the fringe of Adventist life-style. I felt I had much to hide—divorces, meat-eating, restaurant dining on the Sabbath. I had even gone through a tormented period in which I watched *The Flintstones* on Friday night. And, of course, I carried the burden of a non-Adventist father.

Daddy showed himself friendly enough with the gathered saints and relatives—too friendly, I worried. I lived in fear that he would say “Damn,” or mention something nonreligious, like Lyndon B. Johnson, or the price of new cars. Or maybe he would tell one of his racist jokes. My dad was not exactly the most politically correct person to be taking to Detroit, not to mention to a gathering of Adventists, in the mid-1960s.

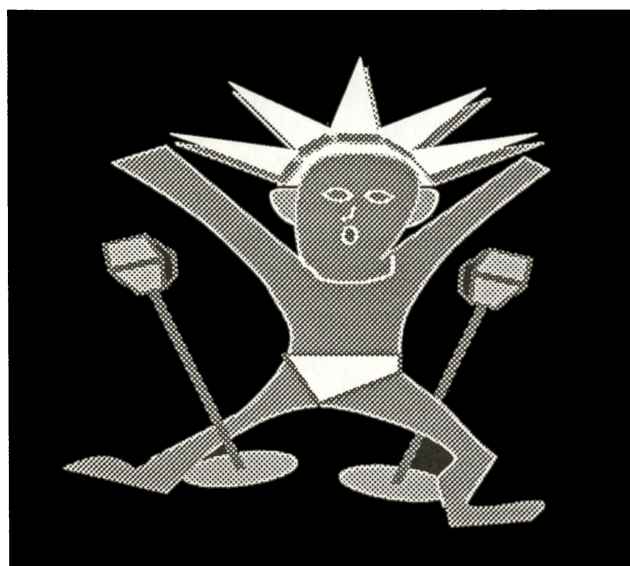
But at 14, I was more socially than politically aware. And what plagued me, after Aunt Florence seated herself in the front seat of Grandpa's Ford, was that in my nervous at-

tempt to make conversation with this person I had never before laid eyes upon, I had mentioned that my father had *shaved* that Sabbath morning. And then I wondered, to myself, “Can Adventists shave on Sabbath?” I had heard, after all, some debate about showering and bathing.

A sinking feeling came over me that whether or not the church at large approved of Sabbath shaving, *these* Adventists, who were of all Adventists most circumspect (one of Grandpa's favorite sayings was “Others may, you cannot”), conducted no questionable activity on the seventh day, particularly not with an *electrical* appliance. It seemed you could do many things on Sabbath as long as they didn't involve something plugged into the wall, slide projectors excepted. You could sit through the whole of Sabbath school and church attempting to finger press a wrinkle out of the middle of your skirt front, but God forbid you should plug in an iron and take care of the problem in 60 seconds. And I knew for a fact, for our Sabbath dinner, we would be eating Heinz Vegetarian Beans cold out of the can in my grandparents' hotel room. But now I had exposed my backslidden father's Sabbath habits in front of an Adventist I hardly knew, with no idea of what the consequences might be.

Aunt Florence did not directly address the issue of shaving, but she did seem uncomfortable and taciturn. I attributed this to her being “the nervous type,” and to her possible disapproval of shaving on Sabbath. When she later demonstrated the warmth and generosity of her personality, I had to modify my theories of her behavior. Maybe being with my General Conference grandfather put her on edge. Or maybe it was Detroit.

The irony of gathering all those city-fearing Adventists in the middle of Detroit was not lost on me. Take them to San Francisco, to the Cow Palace, I thought. The Cow Palace was the biggest building I had ever seen. The



Adventists did just fine in San Francisco; it had more nature. And more Chinese restaurants—good for all those returned missionaries. I figured even Washington, D.C., Indianapolis, San Diego, or Chicago would have been more harmonious to Adventists than Detroit. They hardly knew what to do with Detroit.

Even my worldly father explored Detroit in a surprisingly small-townish way. He, my sister, and I set out one afternoon to explore the bustling area around Cobo Hall. For two days and one night I had been living in the middle of this human melee, farther away from Fresno than I had ever been in my life, so far away that I thought I had come to an Eastern city. I was eager to venture into the grey urbanity surrounding Cobo Hall, to discover what rallied such honking traffic jams and hordes of pedestrians. So the three of us went forth. Amid this pulsing grandeur of skyscrapers and automobiles we found a newsstand, a shoe-shine man, and a shop hawking peanuts, popcorn, and candy. Detroit came unto me as a Butterfingers bar, and I ate, ignorant of its greater glories and sins.

But I was not much more successful at figuring out what was going on inside Cobo Hall. After the Heinz beans and Fig Newtons, the sober, plain-faced crowds, and that bad, beautiful boy, one image remains—a New Guinea bushman wearing war paint and hardly any clothes, brandishing a spear and jumping around the auditorium platform like a roaring human spider. It was the General Conference of Paul Piari.

Adventist leaders presented Mr. Piari as an example of the transforming power of the gospel—whatever that was. I should have known without anyone telling me. But it seemed clear that Paul Piari's most colorful aspect had to do with elements predating his transformation. Whoever put him on stage—the spotlight following his feathers, paint, and

loincloth as he jumped about in a pre-Christian attack mode—obviously believed in the power of the primitive to gain the attention of the saints and the rest of us.

The show intrigued me. My perfect grandparents sat at the end of the row, next to my imperfect parents and my sister (who worked as hard to demonstrate her vices as I my virtues). This was not one family, but two, stretching me out tight between the pull of their two realities. Right then it did not seem much of an advantage to be growing up Adventist. I didn't know how to put it all together in a way that made sense. If you're a reformed cannibal or head-hunter, they parade you up front when, for the love of Christ, you quit cutting out people's hearts. It's harder when you're 14 and have never done anything more antisocial than sass your mother. For us the church had a whole huge list of imperatives.

It confused me. Being an Adventist looked not like one thing, but twenty, or a hundred—an array of odd, disjointed allegiances encompassing everything from Fords and Fig Newtons to shaving on Sabbath and Christ dying on the cross. I didn't know how to fit all those beliefs together in the one person without pulling that person apart into many pieces. I was already torn between doing what felt natural and doing what was right, to the point that it seemed I must always go against myself if I would go for God.

But the man on the stage appeared to be having none of these problems. Paul Piari playfully hooted and leaped through an odd forest of pulpits and microphone stands, and I could not tell where the hooting left off and the leaping began, so seamless was his joining of song and dance. Of course nobody called it a dance; that's just what it looked like to me. Here was God's new instrument playing out before me in native wholeness and simplicity.

I wanted to dance too. But I knew I shouldn't.