

MEMOIR

This is a warm, wistful, wise love story. Told with the help of hundreds of letters written and cherished through the years, Sealed with a Kiss is a wonderful evocation of love in a simpler time. This charming snapshot of mid 20th-century America is a joy to read.

~ Barbara Morgan, Editor-in-Chief, Reader's Digest Books, retired

If you've ever heard the phrases "love at first sight" or "meant for each other" you need to read this book. Maybe you don't believe in such things or maybe you fervently do, in either case Sealed with a Kiss is proof of both. Be warned, you will fall in love with this book.

~ Mike Peters, Pulitzer Prize-winning creator of Mother Goose and Grimm

Sealed with a Kiss: an American Love Story in Letters is so good I couldn't put it down. Romantic and nostalgic, these engrossing pages are a documented history of what it was like to grow up and fall in love in middle-class America in the late 1950s and early 1960s. You'll laugh, perhaps cry, but I guarantee you'll enjoy this book.

~ Bill Dalton, columnist and author

In 1957, Bob Zielsdorf is thirteen and living an ordinary middle-class suburban existence in York, Pennsylvania. On a trip to Massachusetts to visit a friend, he meets fourteen-year-old Fran Jordan. Though they spend less than an hour together (admittedly, an hour that includes some innocent kissing, thanks to a local variation on Spin the Bottle), they agree to write. Remarkably, they do, beginning a correspondence that will last for eight years, encompass hundreds of letters, and end with an enduring marriage. Drawn from their collection of over four hundred perfectly preserved personal letters, *Sealed with a Kiss* is at once a coming-of-age story, a romance, and a glimpse of an America poised on the brink of change. Anyone who remembers having a pen pal, scribbling envelopes with codes like S.W.A.K, or even just falling in love will recognize themselves in its story—and savor its vision of not just a unique moment in time, but also a timeless love.



Prior to writing *Sealed with a Kiss*, Bob Zielsdorf was the longtime CEO of The Peerless Group in Sidney, OH. He lives with his wife Fran, who also contributed to this book, in Vero Beach, FL.



www.bobzielsdorf.com
cover design: cj Madigan

Sealed with a Kiss

an american love story in letters

BOB ZIELSDORF



Sealed with a Kiss
an american love story in letters

BOB ZIELSDORF

TWO *S*HORES BOOKS

*To Fran, who first realized we were meant to be together.
Without her devotion for more than half a century
this book would not exist. And to our five children
and ten grandchildren – all the result of an innocent kiss
long ago.*

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INTRODUCTION

*T*HE TITLE OF THIS BOOK MENTIONS KISSING. BUT IF YOU'RE LOOKING FOR a story full of steamy encounters, you've come to the wrong place.

This book is about love, not about sex. In fact, the subtitle could be "I Married My Pen Pal." Fran and I met during the summer after eighth grade while I was visiting a friend in her town. We decided to write to each other. We kept it up for eight years, during high school and college, and then got married as soon as we graduated. Almost as remarkably, maybe, we both kept the letters we received from the other. Between us, we've preserved a total of 435 of them.

This book shares some of those letters, telling the story of the relationship that developed through their pages and offering a glimpse of the America that was growing up as we were.

During the time that we wrote to each other, Fran and I never went to the same school, lived in the same town, or even resided in the same state. In other words, we didn't have what would be considered a "normal" dating relationship. Maybe because of this, by the time we got married, we knew each other better than most couples who saw each other all the time. There's something about

writing down one's thoughts and feelings that lets down barriers. As time went on, Fran and I did find ways to see each other more frequently, so our entire courtship wasn't entirely letter-based. But letters were certainly its foundation.

Until we were well into college, our letters weren't love letters. They were just newsy bantering between two average, middle-class kids about what was going on in our lives. We had ordinary dating relationships with others and were happy to tell each other about them.

Our candor was possible in part because we met in the 1950s. We thought about sex and talked about it with our friends, but sex outside of marriage was a social taboo back then. It's not that it didn't happen, but it was much more rare than today. Because our dating lives were fairly innocent, there wasn't a lot we couldn't write about.

Sometime in the middle of our college years, both Fran and I began to realize that we were in love, and our letters begin to take on a "love letter" tone. After that point, our commitment to each other changed the nature of our correspondence, gradually bringing it to an end. As we were finishing college and planning our wedding, we saw each other more frequently. The letters slowly became mere adjuncts to our in-person conversations.

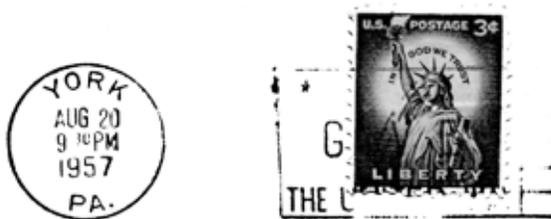
This book, then, is both a love and a coming-of-age story. In addition, I hope it paints a picture, through the lives Fran and I led, of middle-class life in America at one of the country's most pivotal times. I don't mean to hold either of us up as paragons, or to suggest that every kid in America was like us. But I do believe the things we did and the way we did them offer a window into the life of that unique era. The late 1950s and early 1960s—a time of relative peace and stability—were characterized by a special innocence that was lost with the

Vietnam war and the sexual revolution of the late 1960s and 1970s. I feel fortunate to have lived through that era, and to be able to share a glimpse of it here.

For centuries love letters were a staple of the courting process. Today, love letters, and personal letters generally, are almost as passé as poodle skirts and bobby sox. Because Fran and I both cherish our letters from each other, we naturally feel that modern lovers are missing out. I think that email is one of the greatest developments of the twentieth century. I use it constantly—I even text with our kids and grandkids. But can texts and emails possibly feel as personal as messages written in ink on paper, or reveal the true depths of the person writing them, as well as handwritten letters?

I don't think so.

Call me old fashioned. Because I am.



CHAPTER ONE

*W*E MET BEHIND A BUSH, PLAYING A KISSING GAME AT AN EIGHTH-GRADE graduation party. I was 13. She was 14—an older woman by three months. If anyone had predicted then that eight years later Frances Jordan and I would be married, they’d have been accused of smoking dope. Well, maybe not. In the 1957 I inhabited, nobody except maybe weirdo musicians even knew what smoking dope was. But you get my point.

At the time we met, my family lived in York, PA. York in 1957 was an industrial town of about 55,000. I recall its downtown as much like the city set in the movie “A Christmas Story”: a city square dominated by red-brick department stores and smaller shops of every variety. My school, St. Patrick’s, was in the inner city, about a mile and a half from my home. Sometimes I had to walk to or from school, a trek I hated.

My father Frank ran a company called A.B. Farquhar, a division of the Oliver Corporation. A tall man, he was soft spoken except when his temper was roused and more comfortable with facts than emotions. As a teenager, I appreciated both his good advice and his willingness to step back and let me make my own

decisions. He was a shrewd businessman who would much later become my own business partner, but during the years this story chronicles, I mostly felt resentful rather than admiring of the frequent relocations his career demanded.

My mother was a housewife—what is now referred to as a stay-at-home mom. In our middle-class world, hardly anyone’s mom worked outside the home. Smart and ambitious, she always regretted the fact that she was sent to a small Catholic girls’ college rather than the large university she had dreamed of. She felt she could have done bigger things, and had she been born a generation later I’m sure she would have managed them. Instead she poured her drive and energy into the accomplishments that were available to her. Impeccably groomed and dressed, she became an accomplished golfer and piano player, a great ballroom dancer, and a skilled amateur artist who designed both of the houses my family built over the years. Like my father, she was highly social—both of them loved to attend parties, entertain, and play bridge.

I was the only son, with three younger sisters whom I teased unmercifully. We all went to Catholic schools. My Dad wasn’t a Catholic, so my parents were said to have a “mixed marriage.” In those pre-Vatican Council days, in order to marry in the Church, Mom and Dad had to jump through all kinds of hoops. Among them, my father had to pledge that all the children in the family would be raised as Catholics. The Church taught that if you obeyed its rules, everything would be fine and you could go to heaven when you died. Unless, of course, you had the bad judgment not to be a Catholic. So Mom obeyed all the rules and Dad, I guess, hoped for the best. Catholicism was just one of the things I took for granted during the years this book chronicles, rarely in the forefront of my mind but always a presence.

When I met Fran, I had just finished eighth grade at St. Patrick's School. At 13, I was about five feet eight inches tall and, I thought, the world's skinniest kid. My parents could afford to dress me in the fashionable clothes of the day: khakis with a little buckle on the back, charcoal pants, pink shirts, and white socks. One exception was loafers. They were in fashion, but not for me. Mom said they were bad for your feet. Laced-up shoes it was, white bucks or black or brown leather. Sneakers weren't called running shoes yet. Not a status item, they were worn only for gym class or sports or working in the yard.

I was a daily reader of the newspaper but you wouldn't say I was politically aware. That year the daily edition of the *New York Times* cost five cents and the Sunday edition a quarter. Of course, I did know that in 1957 Dwight D. Eisenhower was President. Most people I knew seemed to think Mr. Eisenhower was doing a good job of running the country. About the only thing we kids were worried about was the Bomb. Our teachers told us that the Soviet Union might drop an atom bomb on us someday. They made us do periodic bomb drills, which required us to crouch on the floor under our desks until the drill ended or, as I saw it, they felt like teaching again.

Tony Beck was my best friend. Unfortunately, Tony's dad had lost his job as an executive with a company in York and had to relocate to his new one in Andover, MA. Tony had moved from York to Andover right after seventh grade. Eighth grade was really tough without Tony around. I had other friends but none who lived within walking distance of my house. I recall that as being a very lonely year. So the summer I graduated from St. Patrick's, my parents took mercy on me and said I could go to Andover to visit Tony.

I can't recall now how the arrangements were made. No doubt letters were written between Tony's parents and mine. And there must have been a number

of phone calls to get all the logistics straightened out. This must have been quite a production for our parents, because in those days a long distance phone call was a major event.

Back then, everyone's telephone was black and weighed as much as a small dumbbell. That design was pretty much your only choice. You didn't go to a store and buy something—you took whatever Ma Bell provided. If you lived in a place with modern service, your phone had a rotary dial. Dialing, especially the higher numbers, was not quick. Waiting for the dial to unwind all the way back to the starting point seemed to take all day.

For a long-distance call, you dialed "0" for the operator. The operator, usually a woman, came on the line and asked for the number. You would then say that you wanted to make a long-distance call and state whether it was to be "Station-to-Station" or "Person-to-Person." With "Station-to-Station" calls you took a chance that the actual person you wanted to talk to would be there. If you were calling an adult and some kid answered the phone, you had to pay for the call even if the adult you were calling wasn't home. With a "Person-to-Person" call the operator would ask whoever answered for the particular adult by name. If he was there, great—you got connected. If he wasn't there, there was no connection and no charge. All long distance calls were expensive but "Person-to-Person" was astronomical. The whole thing was sort of like a bet with AT&T, which held the telephone monopoly for the entire country. Anyway, I can only imagine the cost in time and money for my mom and dad to set up this trip.

But even with the kind of hassle they had to go through, life in 1957 was much more straightforward than it is today. Phone calls might have been expensive, but telephone service was simple. For one thing, you only had one phone number to remember and for most people, it only had four digits. Today

our household of two has six 10-digit phone numbers to keep track of, not to mention a variety of voicemail systems.

When the time came that summer to see Tony, I was put on a train for Boston, about 425 miles from York. I don't remember how long the train ride took, but it wasn't overnight. After Tony and his parents met the train in Boston, we drove the 20 miles or so to Andover. My visit lasted two weeks and included many memorable events, though some of them wouldn't be considered very exciting today.

I remember driving on a four-lane divided highway and being amazed at the smooth stretch of black asphalt and the speeds at which you could go. It's possible the road I'm remembering became part of I-95, but I don't really know. The interstate highway system hadn't been officially authorized until the year before. It was supposed to be completed in 12 years at a cost of \$25 billion, though it actually took 35 years and \$114 billion to finish.

There were dozens of other things I still remember about that visit, but the most memorable of all is the graduation party. It was held at the home of one of Tony's classmates, Paula. I was walking into a nest of strangers—except for Tony, I didn't know a soul. They made this new kid welcome and took an interest in me; no one treated me like an outsider, a kindness for which I was really grateful.

We were outdoors on a nice summer evening. Once I was introduced, everyone wanted to know what it was like to live in Pennsylvania (they eat cottage cheese with apple butter on it) and what it had been like to ride a train all the way to Boston by myself (bumpy and boring).

The highlight of the evening was the kissing game. Every boy removed something he was wearing and put it in a pile in the yard. Then the girls dove into the pile and picked something from it. Whoever belonged to the article

a girl came up with was to accompany her behind a large bush (for privacy, of course—after all, this was New England) and kiss. As a man of the world at 13, I was no stranger to Spin the Bottle, but this was a great new twist!

I removed the scapular medal I was wearing and into the pile it went. Scapulars probably aren't very popular anymore, if they ever were. Basically pendants with religious symbols on them, they were worn around the neck, hidden under the clothing. In the 1950s, Catholic boys were encouraged to wear the wool versions because they itched; the resultant self-punishment was supposed to be "offered up" to God. But metal versions were also available.

Fran recalls that I was wearing a cloth scapular. I'm pretty sure that a couple of years earlier I had wised up and jettisoned the itchy cloth one in favor of the metal version, but that detail doesn't really matter any more.

What's important is that I removed whatever scapular it was and threw in onto the pile, along with the watches, identification bracelets, belts, and shoes the other guys had tossed in. At the appointed moment, laser-focused on that scapular, Fran elbowed out another girl to claim me as her prize.

I'm still not really sure why Fran picked me out of the crowd, except maybe because I was tall. I had no muscles, no coordination. I was always the last kid picked for a team in sandlot choose-up baseball. I had no interest in playing football. I was tall enough for basketball, but though I always tried out for the team I rarely got put in. Physically speaking, height was pretty much all I had going for me.

I remember noticing that she was tall and that she was blessed (from a guy's point of view) with a 36-24-36 figure. Okay, maybe not exactly, but that's what it seemed like to me. Both her height and her nice figure were rare commodities

among 14-year-old girls back then, when girls reached puberty later than they do today.

Anyway, the moment when she picked me out was life-changing. What if the other girl had won? Existential questions aside, what I remember was Fran and I kissing behind the tree. It was an innocent kiss. But as far as eighth grade kissing went at that time, it was pretty good.

The next day, hopeful for an opportunity for a second kiss, I asked Tony if we could go visit Fran at her house.

It was a hard, uphill bike ride from Tony's house to hers, but luckily she was home. I'm sure she was surprised to see the two of us. God knows what her parents thought. She came outside, and we stood in her yard chatting for a while. She may have mentioned that she had a whole extended family inside, but she didn't tell me anything about them that day.

I quickly realized that this was clearly not a kissing opportunity. Even if I'd had the nerve to broach the subject, which I didn't, we were standing in her front yard in the middle of the day with her whole family inside and Tony right beside us. That didn't exactly conjure up a romantic atmosphere, but Fran did make me an intriguing offer. She playfully said she would pay me for my scapular medal. I was smart enough to know the currency would be another kiss. But I was too dumb to know what to do. I stammered around the subject long enough that nothing came of it other than the idea that we would write each other. We exchanged addresses and said goodbye, then Tony and I rode off down the hill.

When I got home to York, I actually did write her a letter. Amazingly, she saved it, along with all the others I wrote over the ensuing eight years. Even more amazingly, I saved hers, too.

August 20, 1957

Dear Frances,

I had a very nice train ride home. The train was nice and not dirty. I accompanied Tony's grandmother. That was a job!

Have you recovered from all those relatives yet? Things are quiet around here now because my sisters went swimming and my mother is playing golf.

I hope you are still not jealous of Clare. I don't even know her last name.

Andover certainly is different from York, with all the lakes and everything. The only thing around here is the Susquehanna River. My father has an island down there and a group of guys are going to sleep out there Friday night. By the way—I hope you can read this "handwriting"

Do you have a picture of yourself you can send me?

Well, I have to go now. I hope you will write me soon.

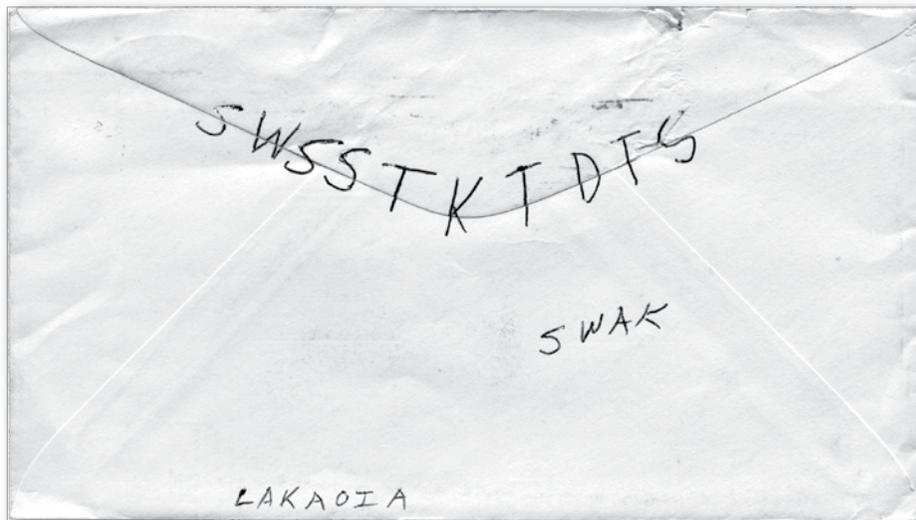
Love,

Bob

Though I mention her in two letters, I have to confess that neither Fran nor I remember who Clare is at this point!

In those days it cost three cents to send a first class letter. ZIP codes hadn't been invented, nor had two-letter state abbreviations. Andover was in "Mass." not "MA". York was either in "Pa." or "Penna.", depending on your mood. A letter usually took anywhere from three to five days to reach its destination. It might have been faster locally, but sometimes it was just the opposite. If you were mailing a letter across the country or internationally, it could take over a week, so it was often best to pay extra for air mail.

From the comment in my letter about my handwriting and the fact that I put the word in quotation marks, you can tell that I was a bit self-conscious about it. In spite of my teachers' best efforts to drill the Palmer method of penmanship into me, I never quite got it. My only bad grades in elementary school related to the fact that I had an uncontrollable scrawl. In the face of that glaring fault, I bravely sent off the first letter, not knowing if I would get a response. To make sure she was properly impressed, I covered the back of the envelope with cryptic letters intended to amuse and mystify her.



Something must have gone right because to my great delight, a response came, and much more quickly than I expected.

August 22, 1957

3:15 P.M.

Dear Bob:

I was so glad to hear from you. I wasn't thoroughly convinced you were going to write.

Right now I'm watching "American Bandstand." It's just the greatest! It's a nationwide broadcast from 3 to 4:30 Monday—Friday. I see it on WMVR-TV in Manchester, N.H. Do you watch it? If you don't, you really should.

Early this afternoon I went downtown & met Geri & Honey. Sometimes Geri tries her hardest to make me feel like a 1st class fool & today was one of those days. I was so embarrassed 'cause she talks so loud & everything. I really like her a lot but sometimes she just pains me. Don't mind me, always complaining.

Honey O'Connor is having a party next Thursday. I sure wish you were here so I could ask you to go with me. (I wonder if you would after Paula's party?)

Monday I had most of my curls cut off & I look much better (not bragging) if you can imagine me looking good, ever!

Gee, looking this letter I realize my writing is very sloppy. Please excuse it but the paper is against my knees & is kind of wobbly.

I do have a picture I can send you but it's not handy right now so I'll send it the next time I write, OK? Send me one of you too!

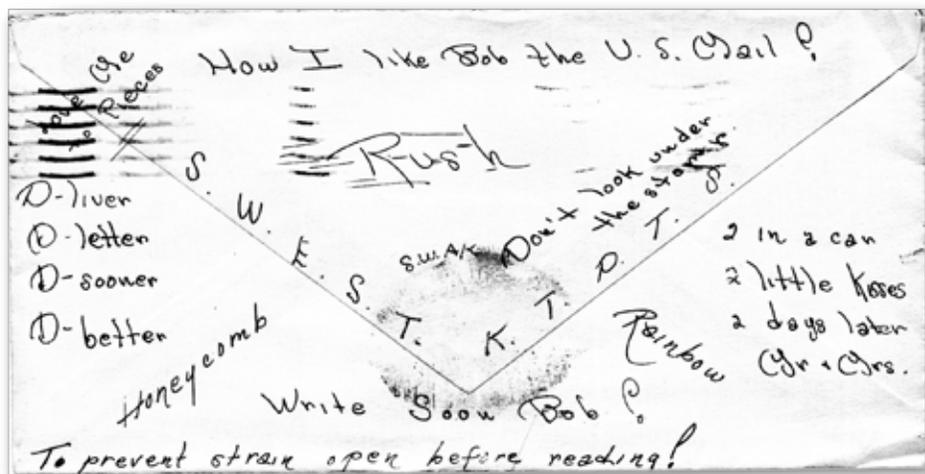
Well I've got to go now. Think of me in your spare time if it's not too boring a thought!

Love ya lots,

Fran

Note that her letter is dated only two days after mine. That means my letter made its way from York to Andover in only two days, and that she didn't waste any time writing back!

And check out the back of her envelope. I thought I was being devilishly clever to put all those mysterious letters on my flap. That she outdid me with her response felt like a very cool thing.



At our two brief meetings, there had definitely been chemistry between Fran and me. But now that we were writing, the physical had instantly been taken out of the equation. What mattered now was the intellectual and the emotional. Humor, caring, common interests, our true values, really—those were the kinds

of things that counted in writing letters. We didn't put them in our letters at a conscious level. They just emerged as we reflected our lives in writing.

In retrospect I'm glad that no one, including ourselves, could have predicted what would happen as the years went on. If we had understood the powerful force that was drawing us together for a lifetime or contemplated writing almost 500 letters in total, we wouldn't have been able to relax and have fun. But blissfully unaware that anything "serious" was happening, that's exactly what we did.



Bob at age 14, 1957