

## Lion's Den

A trip to the zoo was not an adventure my grandmother would have chosen for herself. I'm sure she had very little interest in the "filthy animals" that inhabited the smelly buildings on the south side of the city. But, recently widowed and now all but forced to live with our family of Mom, Dad and three young sons ... which she often called "Boys Town" under her breath when we got on her nerves ... Grandma was learning to live with compromise as well as chaos. A widow didn't have many choices almost 60 years ago.

I wasn't very old at the time, but I had no problem sensing her frustration, as a child often does. As I grew older, I realized that a strange resentment had burned in Grandma toward those for whom she had become a burden. Terribly frustrated at being suddenly destitute, she was unable to voice her anger and rage. So, from time to time she would act it out.

On a sizzling afternoon in August of 1953, we were all crammed into the old Ford, on our way home from the beach after swimming and a picnic. When my father suggested we stop at the zoo to see the new buffalo, I could see Grandma's jaw set itself into a hard line. She said nothing, however, and soon the hot, sticky smell of animal waste rose up to greet us as the car bumped its way into the parking lot in a swirl of road dust and humidity.

The family toppled out of the Ford and walked to the buffalo's pen, lining up along the rail as if a parade were about to march through the small corral. From the boisterous enthusiasm of my parents, you would have thought that inspecting a buffalo was the ultimate small town experience on a Sunday afternoon. It was. Grandma trudged up to the rail last, probably worried that buffalo-watching was unsuitable for a matron. She

thought of herself as an educated and properly raised woman, hardly the truth. My brothers and I were not at all impressed with the stringy haired beast, who stood quietly in his enclosure, munching on grass, a dull look on his countenance. But our degenerate little boy hearts were suddenly won over when he hunched his back like a huge dog and defecated ... loudly, proudly and very aromatically. While everyone else laughed, my poor grandmother swooned and hung on to the fence. Then she grabbed my hand and marched the two of us away from the pen. My grandmother always rescued me from one *des classe* situation or another, and usually left my brothers to their own fate.

Grandma considered me a sensitive and intelligent 9 year old, "the only other inquisitive mind in the neighborhood," she often remarked, "and that's not saying much." We frequently discussed cultural matters like Margaret Truman's voice or conundrums like Arthur Godfrey's refusal to wear a parachute, and mysteries such as whether Desi Arnaz could really play an instrument or if he was faking it while Lucy sang and danced. Grandma said she and I walked a narrow civilized path together through the jungle of our working class neighborhood. My grandmother was stuck up. For a woman always interested in the social ladder, she was not very sociable.

Grandma and I often carried on a dialogue, my Timaeus playing to her Socrates. But it was decidedly limited in scope since neither of us had yet finished the fourth grade. Still we shared a variety of interests. On family outings, we would often wander off together to spy on the birds or inspect an unusual plant or flower while the others endlessly threw a ball back and forth or tried to drown themselves in the lake.

So me and Grandma left the group as they ogled a steaming pile of dung and hunkered up the hill to the main zoo building, which housed the lions, monkeys and whatever the hell you call those things that look like giant rats. It was quiet and dim inside, but just as hot as outdoors and it smelled worse than the buffalo pen. We strolled down the aisle past the caged jackals and vermin, while Grandma began to chatter through her complete zoological knowledge base, which would have taken no more than 11 seconds. But

time moves slowly for a child and I wanted to get home and change into dry clothing. All my squirming around in the back seat on the drive here had done nothing to shake the sand loose in my britches. For reasons still inexplicable to me, the Irish did not allow themselves to disrobe in public bath houses and so we always arrived at the beach with swim suits under our clothing, and went home the same way. We were sometimes dry when we put our pants back on for the ride home, but the bathing suits were more often wet and sandy and terrifically uncomfortable ... in places on the body we were told to seldom touch in private and never scratch in public.

The two of us came opposite the caged lion, a giant lethargic male. The smelly behemoth regarded us with very little curiosity. I became enthralled with the monkeys across the aisle, and a little puzzled by them. I only glanced over at my grandmother when I noticed she was trying to get the lion's attention. Grandma was a wonderful and strong woman, but somewhere in her past the fairy of self-importance had hit her a little too hard with the uppity stick. My grandmother could stand insult and injury, but never disinterest. You could not purposely fail to notice the old woman and live to tell about it. A little unbalanced by the beast's inattention, Grandma opened her purse, pulled out a pack of Tums, peeled one off and threw it down through the bars at the lion, hitting him square in the eye. He blinked, but otherwise remained at rest. She shouted at him, but got no reaction. Something now snapped in Grandma's soul and she became infuriated. If her mind had been able to make a sound, I would have heard the click-click of a bullet being chambered. Spittle formed in the corners of her mouth and I could hear her breathing grow short. She hauled off and fired the entire pack of Tums at the huge cat. A sharp report sounded in the quiet zoo and the other animals became suddenly hushed. Mr. Leo Lion was hit hard on a large canine tooth that jutted from his gaping jaw. This is the main dental hardware lions use to tear apart their victims, like poor innocent kids and their deranged grandmothers. The Tums bounced back, twanging on the cage's bars and landed back at Grandma's feet. Leo looked up at her.

Maybe he was having a bad day. Maybe he was fed up or maybe his tooth had a cavity. He lunged off the floor of the cage with a great tearing scrape of his cigar-length claws and crashed into the bars in a huge orgasmic rage of roaring, snarling, spit and very bad breath. Grandma wet her pants.

Lions have a very good sense of smell, perhaps 20 times more sensitive than humans. Grandma didn't know it, but her urine and aggression had just made a perfectly credible mating overture to a 600 pound male lion.

Big guys like Mr. Lion make certain movements when they are ready to mate. These are obvious to any species, even humans, unless you're a young boy whose attention is elsewhere. Even in the presence of his heavy breathing, the monkeys captured my notice and I lost interest in the lion. Grandma didn't. When the rest of the family arrived, they found she had taken her glasses out and was standing at the lion's cage in rapt attention, chewing nervously on the Tums in time to his grunting. I was across the aisle watching the monkeys do things with each other that looked rather peculiar, but the little guys and girls seemed to be having a lot of fun

I don't believe my mother and father ever fully understood Grandma's feelings in her first years with us. But they had the good sense to give her more attention after our day with the animals. Eventually my grandmother came to accept her new life with us. And for whatever reason, Mom and Dad never took us back to the zoo.

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