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Gorgeous

The advent of television made quite an impact on our household in 1951. I was nine years old and I can't tell you what the hell we did in the evening before TV. But with the coming of the "evil eye," our routine quickly took shape for the new age.

We boys always wrangled out of washing up the dinner dishes, but we completed our school homework before the family, including Grandma, filed into position in front of the TV as the sun set slowly in the west. Never in our lives afterward were any of us as punctual as on those nights when Lucy or Uncle Miltie or Sid Caesar came on the air promptly at eight o'clock. By today's standards the entertainment didn't last long. Whatever the evening's fare, my brothers and I were off to bed by 10:00, while Mom, Dad and Grandma watched the news and then closed up the house for the night.

But on Friday evenings, we were allowed to stay up late and watch whatever was on. Normally, The Big Story (about reporters finding their most important story) was followed by boxing. Parental control was unnecessary, since the advertisers did an extremely good job of making sure absolutely nothing even mildly offensive ever appeared in our living room. The only ad I remember that was remotely scandalous was aired after 11 o'clock at night and showed a brassiere on a mannequin. She had no head and she disappeared below the rib cage. The voice-over contained language that sung praises to the garment while carefully stepping around its function. That didn't stop my older brother, however. He stood beside the TV, took his shoe off and held it to his mouth like a microphone and said, "Best mileage ever from this Holdsum von Floppen." As Grandma launched herself from her chair to grab him, he ran out of the room shouting, "That's German."

Grandma believed going to the movies to watch intimations of illicit heterosexual love was all right, but of course she would have never gone to a gay bar. Had anyone said the word "Lesbian" out loud in her presence, I'm quite sure she would have fallen over comatose, maybe even dead.

Grandma's secret entertainment in the early 1950's ... and it wasn't much of a secret in a household with five other people ... was to watch wrestling on WKTV on Saturday nights. She was getting pretty old by

then, just into her fifties, but youthful looking. She let nothing interfere with viewing the half naked men bounce and strut around the canvas ring, clutching each other in aggressive embraces and hammer holds, and thwacking each other with body blocks. Enrique Torres, Don Eagle, and Whipper Watson were the idols of the time, but none was so glamorous as the redoubtable Gorgeous George Wagner.

Mr. Wagner didn't appear in the ring until near midnight so the ad agency men could show an extra hour of pitches containing mindless lyrics put to bad music. A favorite among my brothers and I featured Bucky Beaver (without his sidekick, Bullwinkle the Moose) singing, "Brusha, Brusha, Brusha, with the new Ipana. It's dandy for your tee-ee-th."

As the night wore on and we boys began to nod off in front of the tiny screen, Grandma kept her vigil, waiting for the other wrestlers to finish as she rocked her chair faster and faster until Gorgeous George appeared in the ring. At his entrance, Grandma's enthusiastic clapping would bring us back up to the level of consciousness in time to see a walking refrigerator of a man with blond flowing hair enter the ring, his flouncy gown trailing behind him. Grandma swooned and we kids fell back to sleep. Wrestling was about as risqué as anything Grandma allowed herself, if you didn't count her special "cough medicine" bottle she kept in her closet high on a shelf.

When Gorgeous George's promoters scheduled a match in our city in the winter of 1952, Grandma reacted as a teenager would several years later when Elvis came to town.

"Oh, we can't miss it. We just have to go," she would blurt out a few times each day.

"I'm taking Eddie to the Avon Friday night," Grandma announced to my parents on a snowy afternoon in 1952. It was the first I'd heard I'd be going with her.

"He's not ready for that," said my father.

"Oh Fred," said my mother, "let him go. He's the only one of the boys interested and Grandma needs someone to go with her."

That was true. My two brothers thought wrestling a farce, although they would have gone along for the ride if asked. I was almost sure it was fake, but Grandma and I got along well and she always bought me heaps of candy. In her experience, teeth didn't last beyond childhood anyway.

My father did not reply, so I had no idea why he thought I wasn't ready for adult wrestling, sitting among men as they chewed on their cigars, spit out the juices, slipped a flask of whiskey from an inside pocket and swore like troopers. I figured if Grandma could take it, so could I.

When Friday came, it was snowing once again. Gram announced she was taking me out for dinner to the Villa Restaurant a block down the street. She often took any one of us three boys with her for a fried

fish dinner on Friday night, but only one boy at a time. As it happened it was my turn to go. When we stepped off our front porch steps, she steered me up the street instead of down.

"We're going the wrong way, Gram."

"We're going up to the bus stop and then to the Avon."

"Dad said we couldn't ..."

"Your father did NOT forbid you from going. He only advised."

Now THAT was something for my little brain to think about, although the probable outcome of my rumination would no doubt indicate disobedience. But there was a more pressing issue.

"When do we eat?" I asked.

The bus made it's way over to Eagle Street and then along the route to downtown Utica. I assumed we would stop at another of Grandma's favorite places, the Ten Pin Tavern. The TeePee, as we called it, was an upscale neighborhood bar that served fried fish dinners on Friday night, just like the Villa on Leah Street. But the Teepee had table cloths and a waitress who called me "sir" rather than "sweetie pie" and referred to Grandma as "Ma'm" instead of "Granny."

"We have plenty of time before the wrestling show," Grandma told me as the bus approached the restaurant.

Frankly, I wasn't very excited. I had been thinking of my father's negative reaction to wrestling and I felt a little guilty. True, wrestling didn't appear to be sordid entertainment, but if Dad didn't care for it, it must not be the best way to spend an evening. Grandma's opinion held some authority, but a father's belief system weighed more than a grandmother's.

Snow fell from the sky on this late winter night. The alternating warm and cold days at this stage of winter left behind partially melted street surfaces with washboard stretches of bare pavement and bumpy patches of ice. Gaping holes dotted the pavement, the work of previous freezings. A small kid could have hidden in one, assuming he wanted to get killed. My empty stomach began to churn each time the driver ran us over a bump in the road. All the sliding windows on the vehicle rattled like we were being strafed by enemy aircraft as we crashed our way over railroad tracks and every single manhole cover in our path along Eagle Street to downtown. However, like any nine year old, my vigor improved miraculously as I contemplated the next fun thing to do, but not too far beyond five or ten minutes into the future.

The Ten Pin whizzed by outside the bus window.

"Hey, Gram," I said. "How come we didn't get off for the TeePee?"

"It's a special night," she replied. "We're going to the Waldorf Cafeteria."

This was terrific news! Adults claimed the Waldorf's food to be superior, but the attraction for me was cafeteria style serving by a happy and heavy woman who really piled the food on a hungry boy's plate.

A typically selfish kid, I gave no thought to Gram having to pay more for us to dine at the Waldorf. I'm sure it took her beyond the weekly budget she had set for herself. I remember my grandmother as both generous and frugal. She never had much money and she tried to hold on to any cash that came her way. She'd known poverty as a child. As an eight year old girl, she found herself underage and fired from her job when the Child Labor Laws were passed in the 1890's. The new laws put her out of work. Like many other younger children, Grandma and two siblings no longer had earnings to bring home to help pay the rent or to buy food and clothing. The government seemingly had no consideration for how families would survive. Grandma's parents and brothers and sisters lost their apartment and were kicked out on the street. Their belongings were piled up on the curb by their landlord. The family was forced to split up and look for work and living quarters wherever they found them.

Grandma was Mom's step mother. She had married Grandpa and, though a Presbyterian, agreed to bring up Mom Catholic. She seldom accompanied us to our church, but each time she blessed us with her presence the morning was always memorable. While we brought our missals to Mass, Grandma brought her dream book. Dad would sit amongst us in the pew and do a slow burn while the old woman looked up her dreams. On the drive home she would ask if anyone checked on how Father McAdoo spent the money collected each week. She hoped he wasn't sending the money to Rome, "over there with the Fascists." She wondered if McAdoo's housekeeper was more than a housekeeper, whatever that meant. Grandma considered Catholicism dismal and joyless. "Who would name a church after a casket?" she asked one Sunday morning, referring to Our Lady of the Holy Sepulcher. (When the basketball team scored, our cheerleaders yelled "Ho-lee Sepulcher, Ho-lee Sepulcher," as one might yell "HO-lee MO-lee" or "HO-HO-HO chi-minh. In fact, Holey Moley was our nickname for the church.)

The bus windows calmed down as we arrived in the downtown area of Utica, where the merchants paid a lot of taxes and expected the roads to be re-paved on a regular basis. When we arrived at our stop in front of Grace Episcopal Church, I stood to allow Gram to walk down the aisle to the front of the bus to exit by the forward door. She turned and gave me a look, rolling her eyes in an advance token of disapproval. I hurried to the back door and poised myself on the top step, hands gripping the vertical shiny poles on either side in readiness for the jump.

As the bus stopped and the doors opened, I threw my body back and then whipped forward, pulling on the poles to fly straight out the back door into the snowy night. This was my version of an Army Airborne parachute jump and I always did it from the back door where the bus driver couldn't reach out and stop me. Falling on the snow covered sidewalk, I'd roll off to one side, sometimes colliding with the legs of an innocent bystander. To this day, I've never lost the urge to jump when

exiting a bus. But I gave it up as a teenager when I twisted my ankle and my date left me on the sidewalk, so embarrassed was she to be with a boy who might one day join the circus and be shot out of a cannon. The police picked me up off the sidewalk and gave me a ride home, but only because my Uncle Billy was a cop. Mom was mortified when the cruiser came up our street and deposited me at the end of the driveway. She was sitting on the front porch as I staggered to the bottom of the stairs. Sergeant Maccachiatti leaned out the window of the patrol car and shouted to my mother ... and all the neighbors sitting out on a fine summer evening ... “He’ll be OK. Found him lying on the sidewalk downtown.”

But here on this snowy night with Grandma, I did a perfect touchdown and roll, scaring only a few passersby who were waiting for the bus. Picking myself up and looking around at the lights of downtown, I was as un-self conscious as any nine year old could be. The snow had let up and Genesee Street looked like a fairy land of white. The streetlights illuminated the facades of the first and second floors of the retail and commercial buildings, some a dozen stories high. I stared up at the Grace Church steeple, which rose up through the glow of the lights and then disappeared into the blackness of a universe I could only imagine.

Grandma dragged me across Genesee Street. I was embarrassed to have my hand held by an old lady, even if I was related to her. We were sure to “look both ways and then a second time for good measure,” even though with the snow, not very many cars were on the streets. On a weekday afternoon in good weather, this wide intersection of Genesee, Columbia and Seneca Streets would be a hazardous crossing. Especially for kids, because we were so short and drivers couldn’t see us until we went flying up over their windshields. According to my older brother. Well, he was right about the cookies. Right or wrong, since he was the oldest in our crowd, all the neighborhood kids believed him ... about everything. When we had grown to be adults, I once asked him if he took any responsibility for the incarceration rate of the group of kids we grew up with and with whom he had shared his opinions and advice at age 12. He looked at me a moment and then said “Yes, I do.” I didn’t believe him so I dropped it. Later he told me he’d misunderstood and thought the word “incarceration” had meant something to do with sex.

A short distance over Columbia Street we turned and pushed through the door into the Waldorf Cafeteria as a blast of heated air met us and steamed up my glasses. I spent a moment standing in the middle of the entranceway, my hands dog-paddling like I’d just been struck blind and was waiting for someone from Nazareth to come and restore my sight. Smells of cabbage and turkey and meat loaf and spiced ham quickly coaxed me into pulling my glasses down my nose to stare over them and follow Grandma to an empty booth where we left our coats, gloves and

my hat. We headed to the food line while I bounced up and down trying to see what was on the menu.

A large man was ahead of us in line and his threadbare coat spoke to his meager circumstances. The seaman's watch cap pulled down over his ears caused me to wonder if he'd come into town on the canal, even though he looked to be a hobo who had arrived on a train. He could have been a workingman, but most of the city's factory workers and tradesmen would have left the downtown area by then and be whooping it up in the neighborhood taverns like the one down the street from our house. I decided he must have just jumped off the train from New York City after a free ride in a boxcar. He was no doubt here to get his grub before he jumped on a westbound freight headed outbound, balling the jack through Syracuse toward Niagara Falls and on to the Great Lakes. I'd always wanted to go to Niagara Falls, but was uncertain I'd find any excitement at the Great Lakes.

The fat lady waited patiently while Grandma and I argued over whether I could have both the meatloaf dinner as well as a second spiced ham entrée. We heard the skinny lady at the cash register tell the hobo in front of us he couldn't have the food on his tray.

"I forgot my wallet," he said. "I'm working nearby. I'll bring the money back in a bit."

Not likely, I thought. After the westbound left town, he'd never be heard from again. And not surprisingly, the woman shook her head no.

Grandma muttered something to herself and pushed her arm beyond the man toward the cash register.

"Here," she said, proffering a five dollar bill, "I'll pay for the three of us."

This was not surprising. My grandmother was a soft touch to anyone on the street needing a handout. Some people who were brought up poor are surprisingly not generous, but Grandma always was.

The skinny lady at the cash register gave Grandma her change. Boxcar Bob, as I was now calling the man in my mind, smiled with a twinkle in his eye and said, "Why, Thank You, Ma'm." I wondered if he would someday mail a dollar from his cold water flat in Chicago, where I was sure he lived down by the docks, between the stock yards I had read about and maybe a locomotive roundhouse, which I'd read about and always wanted to visit. I wanted to see the turntable move the engines around. Maybe I should introduce Grandma to this man whose name I was now sure had to be Bob. Grandma was pretty old, but probably not too old to get married again. If she and Bob hit it off, I'd get the chance to see Chicago. Every year I could go visit her in the stockyards.

Maybe Boxcar Bob was thinking the same, because he followed us back to our booth and squeezed in next to me so he could sit across the table from Grandma and get a better look at her. He was a large man and had I closed my eyes I could have easily imagine I was sharing the bench

with a Grizzly bear. His hands were quite large, but were surprisingly free of the normal grime and nicks of a working man like my Dad and my uncles.

“Really, sir!” pronounced my grandmother, just as Bob opened his mouth to speak. “I’ve bought your sandwich, but not your company, young man. Can’t you find somewhere else to sit?”

I turned to look at the big man and he was crestfallen, the corners of his wide mouth turned down in disappointment.

“I’m very sorry, Ma’m,” said Bob, “if you’ll give me your address, I’ll send ...”

“Certainly not!” interrupted Grandma.

I’ve known my grandmother almost ten years and I can tell when she is really upset. My opinion: she was not. Mildly annoyed, maybe, and sounding terrifically insulted, but I sensed she was enjoying the encounter.

Bob leaned back and sighed. He scooped the sandwich up from his plate and wrapped it in a paper napkin. Lifting the heavy ceramic coffee cup, he took a big slurp, dribbling some of it down his chin. He wiped his face with the cuff of the old dirty coat and jammed the sandwich into a pocket which had probably last held a monkey wrench or maybe a pet mouse.

He rose from the booth, stood to his full height and said, “Then I’ll thank you again, Mam, and say good bye to you and your escort.” He looked at me and said, “Good evening to you, sir.”

That sewed it up, he’d make a great grandfather, even if he was a little young for Grandma. Bob turned and left the Waldorf Cafeteria, pushing out through the door into the snowy night, headed down the wide swath of Broadway to the tracks and his next boxcar, probably, and to the destiny that awaited him at the foot of Lake Michigan. That’s where Chicago is, and yes, I had all A’s in Geography that year.

Maybe it was my imagination, but I thought I saw a hint of disappointment in Grandma’s face. She didn’t say much as she chewed on her fricasseed chicken and I ate my meat loaf dinner with half of a spiced ham entrée on the side, followed by two pieces of apple pie, the second with ice cream given to me by the fat lady in appreciation of my business.

We got up to leave and I spotted a bobbie pin down on the seat where Boxcar Bob had sat next to me. I picked it up, but having no need for it, I was about to ask Grandma if she wanted it when the light touched it, giving it a beautiful golden glow. Wow! A golden bobbie pin! I stuck it in my pocket. I’d add it to the leather bag of discarded jewelry I kept at home. Mom was embarrassed when I asked neighborhood ladies for any old jewelry they might have. I was convinced a career as a jewel thief would be a terrific way to spend my approaching adulthood, only a decade away. What I needed was practice at this stage, so I’d have my little brother hide the jewels somewhere and then I’d attempt to steal

them without him catching me. I gave up my career plan when a priest told me it was probably a mortal sin to steal a million dollars in jewelry. I've often wished I'd asked if only a half million dollars was a mortal sin.

The Avon Theater was an old burlesque house built in the previous century and later turned into a movie theater. Tonight it would be converted into a wrestling palace by erecting the ring over the floor of the orchestra pit at the foot of the stage. The best seats in the house that night were uncomfortable folding chairs, set up on the stage with their backs to the movie screen. Grandma purchased terrific seats down in front among the regular seating, but for someone my height we were a little too close to the ring. I could see most of the wrestling action, except when one guy was pinning another at the far end of the ring. Then I'd jump up and stand on my seat, only to be pushed down by a fat man behind me, who wore a fedora pulled down over his forehead almost to his eyebrows, and had an unlit cigar clamped in his teeth.

When the wrestling matches began, I bounced up and down in my seat like any nine year old in anticipation of a great evening of men flexing their muscles and abusing each other on the tightly drawn sheet of canvas. But although I expected lots of action, not much happened up there in the ring during the first few matches. The half naked men were not throwing each other into the ropes or squashing their opponents down to the mat and standing on their chests or grinding a heel into the other fellow's jugular vein. Or lashing out with a kick to the other guy's groin when the referee inexplicably looked the other way. Instead of such fun filled entertainment played out before the main event of the evening with Gorgeous George and other luminaries, these early matches appeared to be honest to goodness sporting matches, just like the high school wrestling team. There's nothing so boring as honest wrestling, except maybe honest baseball. Or any kind of baseball, come to think of it.

After the second match, I begged a dime from Grandma for a candy bar and headed up the strip of worn carpeting between the rows of seats on my way to the lobby and the candy counter.

"Hey, youngster," said a booming voice behind me just as I paid for my Baby Ruth. "Are you placing a bet or buying a beer," Danny Tollen laughed, as I peeled back the wrapper on the candy bar.

Danny was Dad's friend from work, the local newspaper's photographer.

"How's about I get a shot of you and Gorgeous George, later," he said. "Terrific human interest, beauty and a junior sized beast!"

"That would be great!" I almost shouted. "We're down in front near the ring."

You and your brothers? With your Dad?"

“No,” I answered, “he doesn’t like wrestling, I don’t think. Grandma brought me”

“Now there’s a photograph!” Danny said with even bigger smile on his face.

“Hey,” said Danny, “you wanna meet him? Gorgeous George? You can tell him to be sure to say Hello to your grandmother on his way to the ring. Then I’ll get the best shot of the month!”

“Well, sure,” I said.

“C’mon, youngster, I know him well enough. Met him an hour ago.”

Danny led me up the stairs beyond the mezzanine and then tapped three times on an unmarked door. It was opened by a short, bald headed man with a cigarette hanging off his lower lip. He let us in.

We were in the projection booth, tonight the wrestlers’ dressing room. Up against the side wall seated on a bar stool, in gold lame boxing shorts, with a golden head of hair, sat Boxcar Bob smoking a cigarette. Dressed in his regalia and with his hair poofed up, he did indeed look somewhat like the George we’d seen on television. TV cameras covering wrestling in the early 1950s never got much closer than some distance above the ring.

“Meet Gorgeous George,” said Danny.

George looked at me and began to laugh, a great open faced laugh that would wear well on a young grandfather.

Danny said, “This boy has a grandmother here tonight! What a great publicity shot if the two of you ...

Still laughing, George interrupted, “You could say I’ve already tried to meet her and was rejected.”

The two men were joined by George’s manager and all three quizzed me about which aisle my seat was on and whether Grandma was excitable and if she wouldn’t mind having her picture in the paper with a wrestler.

“Oh, no, she wouldn’t mind at all!” I crooned.

“But you can’t tell her,” said Danny. “I want a real surprise on her face.”

I never keep secrets, but I did not want to disappoint Danny and Mr. Gorgeous, so I simply clammed up and said very little when I got back to Grandma. She didn’t notice, probably because she was now having an argument with the Fedora man behind us.

Sitting down in her seat, Grandma faced forward and then turned slightly to look at me. She pointed her thumb back over her shoulder.

“The nerve of that man!”

That Man leaned forward to address me.

“I was just sayin’ to your mother she should keep a tighter rein on you, young man.”

“Mother?” said my grandmother. “My dear sir, I am old enough to –“

“Here he comes,” I shouted.

Down the aisle with his retinue trailing behind came Gorgeous George in a blazing white bedroom gown over gym pants and a shirt with gold lame trim. His full head of golden hair was luxurious and caught the light as though he'd been sent from Olympus.

I began to yell. "Hi, Mr. Gorgeous, Hi Mr. Gorgeous."

Grandma shot up from her seat and turned to face uphill in the theater.

"Oh, my gol ..." she said when she recognized the man all but sent fleeing from our table at the Waldorf Cafeteria.

"It's Gorgeous George. It's Gorgeous George," I kept repeating as I pushed her from behind out of the seating into the aisle.

Danny the photographer was now leading Gram to a spot he'd picked for the best photo. He motioned for me to come over and take her hand.

He bent down and loudly whispered to be sure I heard him.

"Don't let go of her hand. Don't let her move off this spot."

Gorgeous George was now opposite us holding up a one dollar bill. He genuflected down to one knee while he held the proffered dollar bill up to Grandma.

Danny's press camera began popping flash bulbs as fast as he could load them into the reflector.

"Thank you, Mrs. Stephenson, kind lady, for loaning me the money for my fare earlier this evening. I now bring you recompense."

"Oh my gol, Mr. George," she said. "Please get up. Oh, this is so"

She probably wanted to say it was embarrassing, but it would have been premature. Embarrassing was what came next.

Gorgeous George, stood to his full height, reached out and pulled my grandmother to his breast. She looked up, he bent his head and planted a Rudy Valentino kiss solidly on her lips. He let go, saluted her as if Grandma was his First Sergeant, and left us for the ring.

Grandma was ready to faint. As I led her back to our seats I felt her hand trembling.

"Congratulations, Granny," said the fat man in the fedora.

Through the weekend Grandma was kind of quiet. On Sunday morning, I heard my mother gasp when she brought in the paper from the front porch.

There on page one of the "Local" section was a huge picture of Gorgeous George with his arms wrapped around Grandma, giving her the kiss of any woman's lifetime. But the short caption was the killer. "Area Maiden Captured by Meaty Champion." Meaty?

We all had a good laugh over the photo and Gram's spirits seemed to lift as we discussed her big adventure of the night before. The article mentioned something I didn't remember from the event. Mr. George handed out golden colored bobbie pins as a souvenir and keepsake.

“I wish I’d got one,” said Grandma, “rather than a sloppy kiss.”
“Guess what, Gram?” I shouted. “I’ve got one! He left it in the booth for you at the Waldorf Cafeteria.”

When Grandma came home from her Presbyterian Church around one o’clock in the afternoon, she was subdued.

The following Saturday night as my brothers and I gathered around the television set for the wrestling matches, Gram’s chair was empty. I ran to the back of the house and entered her room. She sat reading a magazine.

“Aren’t you going to watch wrestling?” I said.

“No, I guess I’m not as interested as I used to be.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“‘Cause it’s fake,” she said.

“Well, we always sorta knew that,” I replied.

She was quiet for a moment, and I knew she was mulling over what to tell me.

“I guess now that I’m a grandmother,” she said, “I should have more dignity.”

“You’ve always been a grandmother,” I said, “ever since I’ve known you.”

It was nowhere as much fun watching wrestling on Friday night without Gram and her grunting and rocking back and forth in her chair.

When I spoke to Mom about it the next day, she said, “I think a few people at her church told Grandma she shouldn’t have gone to a wrestling match.”

“What do they know?” I said. “She shouldn’t listen to them.”

“It’s the way people are,” said Mom. “When you talk to people, they give you their opinion.”

“She should go to Holy Moley more often,” I replied in all seriousness. “No one talks to anyone in a Catholic church.”

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