

Smolder

(A Trip To The Zoo)

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

My grandmother never bore children of her own. Instead, she married my widowed grandfather, bringing up Mom from age seven as if the two were girlfriends. I can think of no better way to describe Grandma than as a married spinster. If you've seen photos of Eleanor Roosevelt, you have a good idea how my grandmother looked and dressed ... whether on her way to church, at the beach or wearily digging for spuds in the garden ... a big floppy hat, old-lady dress and "sensible" tied shoes adorning her large feet. Her closet held under a dozen dresses, most a buff color with large pockets for work or play, and the others polka-dot on navy blue silk for church and funerals. Overly formal most of the time, Grandma thought of herself as an educated and properly raised lady, which was hardly the truth.

I wasn't very old when she came to live with us, but as a child often will, I had no problem sensing her frustration. As an adult, I now realize a strange resentment burned in her toward those for whom she had become a burden. Terribly frustrated at being destitute, Grandma was unable to voice her anger and rage. From time to time she would act it out.

On a sizzling afternoon in August of 1953, the entire family crammed into the old Ford and began our way home from the beach after swimming and a picnic. When my father suggested we stop at the zoo to see the newly acquired buffalo, Grandma's jaw set itself into a hard line. She was tired after a full day of family frolic, but said nothing.

Soon the hot, sticky smell of animal waste blew through the windows 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, tripping over tufts of grass on the way.

Unannounced visitors should always be prepared for anything, and the buffalo had evidently been too busy to finish his toilet before we arrived. However, he was enthusiastically unburdening himself as we began to assemble along the rail. My parents reacted by observing the blue jays in the trees, while my brothers attempted to partially imitate the beast. Grandma swooned, steadied herself on the fence rail for a few seconds and then grabbed my hand and marched the two of us away.

Grandma habitually rescued me from one déclassé situation or another. She regarded me as a sensitive and intelligent 9 year old. "You're the only other inquisitive mind in the neighborhood," she said, "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 we walked a narrow civilized path together through the jungle of our working class neighborhood. For a woman interested in the social ladder, she was not very sociable.

Although quite different in age, my grandmother and I shared a variety of interests. On family outings, we might wander off together to spy on the birds or inspect an unusual plant or flower, while the others threw a ball back and forth endlessly or nearly drowned themselves in the lake. We often carried on a spirited dialogue, my Timaeus playing to her Socrates. But it was decidedly limited in scope, since neither of us had finished the fourth grade.

We left the group as they ogled a steaming pile of dung and hunkered up the hill to the zoo's Animal House to see the monkeys and whatever the hell you call those things that look like giant rats. Dimly lit, the menagerie baked like an oven inside, and smelled much worse than the buffalo pen. Strolling down the aisle past the caged jackals and vermin, Grandma began to chatter through her complete zoological body of knowledge, which would have taken no more than eleven seconds.

But time moves slowly for a child. 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 more often our bathing suits were wet and sandy and terrifically uncomfortable ... in places on the body we were told to seldom touch in private and never scratch in public.

As we came to a cage smelling so bad the breath caught

in my throat, an eerie huffing sound issued forth and echoed around the concrete interior of the building. A huge form lay at the back of the darkened cage. Attached to the railing in front of the heavy bars, a small sign identified the inmate as a male North American Timber Wolf, one of the largest of the species. I couldn't see well into his shadowy den, and the smelly behemoth gave us no sign of recognition. Easily bored, my attention turned to the monkeys across the aisle. I soon became enthralled with the frisky little fellows, but a little puzzled by the intensity of their play. I glanced over at my grandmother only when I noticed her attempts to entice the Goliath out into the light by leaning over the rail and swinging her purse wide to swipe at the bars.

My grandmother was a wonderful woman, but somewhere in her past the fairy of self-importance had touched her a little too hard with the uppity stick. Grandma could stand insult and injury, but never disinterest. You could not purposely fail to notice the old woman and live to tell about it. Unbalanced by the beast's inattention, Grandma opened her purse, pulled out a pack of Tums, peeled one off and flung it through the bars at the animal. She certainly hit him, because I heard a loud grunt, but he remained at rest. She shouted at him, but got no reaction.

Something now snapped in my grandmother's soul and she became infuriated. If her mind had been able to make a sound, I would have heard the click-clack of a bullet being chambered. Spittle formed in the corners of her mouth and her breathing grew short. She hauled off and fired the entire pack of antacids at the huge shaggy beast. A sharp crack sounded inside the cage and the Tums could be heard bouncing around in the dark. The entire zoo suddenly went silent, and even the monkeys came to a dead stop.

A feeling of fright ran down my spine. In my mind's eye, I saw Mr. Wolf thwacked hard on a large canine tooth jutting out from his jaw. This is the main dental hardware a wolf uses to tear apart his victims, like poor innocent kids and annoying old women. My grandmother succeeded in her quest. The beast reacted, but Grandma got about 400 pounds more than she had bargained for.

Maybe he was having a bad day. Maybe he was fed up or maybe his tooth had a cavity. Maybe the big cat didn't like being moved into the cage of a long departed wolf so his own cage could be re-painted. One thing for sure, the King of the Jungle did not gladly suffer an old lady hitting him in the head with a pack of Tums. When I heard the roar, it was unmistakable. This was not the howl of a wolf. It was the awful sound of something an awful lot bigger ... as if a train was crashing through the zoo. Mr. Leo Lion lunged off the floor of the wolf cage with a great tearing scrape of his cigar-length claws and flew forward into the light, slamming against the bars in

a huge orgasmic rage of roaring, spit and very bad breath. Grandma wet her pants.

Lions have an uncanny sense of smell, perhaps 20 times more sensitive than humans. Grandma didn't know it, but her aggression and urine produced the best imitation of a mating overture this 600 pound male lion had seen in a long time.

Big guys like Leo make certain movements when they are ready to mate. These are obvious to any species, even humans, unless you're a youngster whose attention is elsewhere. Despite Leo's heavy breathing, the monkeys still grabbed my attention and I lost interest in the Big Bad Boy-Toy. Grandma didn't. When the family joined us in the Animal House, they found my grandmother had taken out her glasses and was standing at the cage in rapt attention, chewing nervously on her fingernails in time to the lion's grunting. Across the aisle, I stood transfixed by the monkeys. The little guys and girls were sure having a lot of fun, but their games were getting more and more peculiar as they paired off and began climbing all over each other. If we kids had done that in school at recess Sister Mary Pharsalia would have had heart failure.

My father joined me at the monkey cage. "What're they doing, Dad?" I asked. He looked at the monkeys, then at me. He looked a second time at the monkeys and again back to me. "A War Dance," he said. "We'd better leave before they attack."

My mother led Grandma away from the lion. I was sure I saw a look of disappointment in his eyes.

The following Christmas I found a copy of "Animals Of The Jungle" on the discount rack at Woolworth's for twenty five cents. I wrapped it up in used Christmas paper and gave it to Grandma. She quoted it often to friends, her eleven seconds of zoological knowledge now exponentially expanded.

I don't believe my parents ever fully understood Grandma's feelings of loss and desperation in her first years with us. But they had the good sense to give her more attention after our day at the zoo.

Eventually my grandmother came to accept her new life with us. She even began to speak to the neighbors. Life went on, with its little surprises. My brothers and I inadvertently discovered Mom and Dad liked stripping naked in the bath house. But for whatever reason, they never took us back to the zoo.

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