

## Lion's Den

My grandmother toured the Utica Zoo as a youngster when it initially opened, many, many years ago, and went back only once that I know of, the day my father insisted on stopping as we drove home from Sylvan Beach one sizzling afternoon in August of 1953. I well remember the day and the hot, sticky smell of animal waste. Grandma couldn't help remark on it as the car bumped its way into the parking lot.

When the family toppled out of the Ford and gathered alongside the buffalo's pen, you would have thought we were lining up on a parade route to see President Dwight D. Eisenhower pass in review. My brothers and I were not at all impressed with the stringy haired beast, until he won our hearts by hunching his back like a huge dog and defecating, loudly, proudly and aromatically. My poor grandmother swooned and hung on to the fence while everyone else laughed. Grandma grabbed my hand and marched me away from the pen. I don't know why she always rescued me, and not my brothers, from one *des classe* situation or another. Grandma considered me a sensitive and intellectual 9 year old, the only inquisitive mind in the neighborhood, she often remarked. We discussed weighty issues like Margaret Truman's voice, Arthur Godfrey's refusal to wear a parachute and whether Desi Arnaz could really play an instrument. Finding ourselves separated from the rest of the family on various outings as we stopped to study a plant or spy on birds or animals was not unusual.

So me and Grandma left the group 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 large rats. It was quiet and dim when we walked inside, but just as hot as outdoors and it smelled worse than the buffalo pen had. We strolled down the aisle among the cages while Grandma began to chatter through her repertoire of zoological knowledge, which would not have taken more than 11 seconds, but time moves slowly for a child. I was much more interested in getting home and changing into some dry clothing. For reasons inexplicable to me, Catholics were not allowed to disrobe in a public bath house and so we arrived at the beach with swim suits under our clothing

and went home the same way. Theoretically, we were dry when we put our pants back on for the ride back home. But the bathing suits were more often wet and sandy and terrifically uncomfortable ... the word itchy comes to mind ... in places on the body we had been reminded to never scratch while in public.

Grandma came up opposite the caged lion, a giant lethargic male. The smelly behemoth regarded us with very little curiosity. My grandmother could stand insult and injury, but never disinterest. You could not purposely fail to notice my grandmother 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 through the bars at the lion, hitting him square in the eye. After a second or two, he blinked. She shouted at him, but got no reaction. Grandma now became incensed. Spittle formed in the corners of the old woman's mouth and I could hear her breathing grow short. She hauled off and flung the whole pack of Tums at the huge cat, this time hitting him hard on a large canine tooth that jutted from his mouth. This is the main piece of dental hardware lions use to tear apart their victims, like poor innocent kids and their deranged grandmothers. The Tums missile made quite an impact. I could hear the thunk.

Maybe the lion was having a bad day, maybe he was fed up, or maybe the tooth had a cavity. He came off the floor of the cage 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 us humans. Because of her aggression and now her smell, Grandma had just made a perfectly credible mating overture to a 600 pound male lion.

Lions make certain movements when they are ready to mate. These are obvious to any species, even humans, unless you're a young boy in an itchy bathing suit. When the histrionics abated, except for the grunting and heavy breathing, I lost interest. Grandma didn't. There she stayed until the rest of the family arrived to find my grandmother had taken her glasses out and was standing at the lion cage in rapt attention, while I was across the aisle watching the monkeys do things with each other I would have thought impossible had I not seen it with my very own eyes.

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