

LIFE WITH GRANDMA...1946-47

When I was Three, we moved away from our North Beach apartment and into the Cotati farm house of my recently-widowed grandmother. Thus began a life for me amongst farm animals and the Sonoma landscape. My father & mother helped with the chicken business and my Dad worked on a piledriving crew around the Bay. In 1946 the Jewish chicken-raising community was thriving. My grandma Tsivye was at the hub of a swirl of left-wing friends from the old country, and second generation 'kids' like my mother.

I was located... within an extended family where Yiddish was often spokenand in a small farm with animals as siblings.

ANIMALS DON'T LAST

First of all was the little Cocker Spaniel I named Toto. Not from the Wizard of Oz because I had never seen a movie. My parents had taken me to see the Ringling Brothers Circus that year and the most amazing of all the hallucinatory things I saw there were the two gorillas they displayed outside the tent. Gargantua was the male and Toto the female. Gargantua was supposed to be like King Kong, the "Biggest Gorilla ever in captivity!" But while I watched Toto, she ate some oranges, and watching her gentle hands slowly separate the sections and pull off the peels just captivated me. I think there was a kind of love that reached through the bars of the cage. A deep look. So I named my puppy Toto. She too had black fur...never mind the ridiculous difference in size. Toto the gorilla was my favorite animal. Unfortunately Toto the dog was not to live very long. She ran down the driveway one day and out onto the road where a car ran over her. I was outside when it happened and remember seeing my mother carrying the little body up the gravel road with a bad look on her face. Up close I could see blood on the black fur and Toto was clearly lifeless. My first experience of death. I only remember an anger centered around the unfairness of it. She was so little, I had just started to take care of her and be her friend. Unfair.

The next animal that caught my full interest was a steer. My father took me with him to an auction and I was intimidated by the whole experience. It was clearly a grownup affair with men yelling in a little dusty arena as animals were paraded up for bidding. My dad took a liking to a little white-faced steer and bought it for \$50. It was very cute, no doubt. I ran around the back pasture with it and loved the way it kicked up its heels. I named it Wahn from the book of Ernest Thompson Seton that my father was reading to me, "Biography of a Grizzly". Here again I paid no attention to the great difference in species. The little steer looked nothing like a bear. But there was something noble and strong about him that made me think it. And like Toto, Wahn was my animal love at the time. It wasn't long before Wahn was as big as a grizzly. And my parents had to introduce me to the idea that Wahn was destined for....eating.

My best adventure with the full-grown Wahn was when my friend Rick Mattila was visiting. I had learned to throw a lasso, and wanted to show off a little. We went down to the pasture and I showed him with my special rope how to lasso a post. Then I showed him how to lasso a steer. I had never done it before, but after all Wahn was my friend, he trusted me. Never mind that the rope was about six feet long. So I walked up and made a little toss around his neck. When Wahn felt the rope, he bolted, the noose tightened...and we were off. I held on fiercely at first because I could only think how awful it would be to lose my special rope. I bumped along spinning and narrowly avoiding a hoof while my friend yelled

and yelled at me to let go. Suddenly the meaning of that voice came through, and with it the understanding that the rope was not coming off. So I let go. We went back to the house and Rick told the story breathlessly. I interrupted to beg my dad to go get my rope back. The adults winced as they realized what I'd done. But my dad went out and managed to calm Wahb down and slip the rope off. That was all I cared about.

We had chickens of course, but I never liked them. They were crowded into rooms with central feeders, and every time you walked into a room, they stampeded away and trampled each other. There were always some dead from being pecked by the others. There were diseases that made them look awful and bodies to be gathered up each day. The smell of the rooms was nasty... the dust, the cackling...it all repulsed me. I had a sadistic feeling towards chickens. Fairly often the family would eat one, which meant a public beheading by axe or neck-wrangling. I had become inured to this kind of death. There was a fascination in seeing a headless chicken still staggering around while blood oozed up from the neck. It made me think they were lesser beings. You could cut off their heads so easily and then they didn't seem to even miss having a brain at first. Couldn't be much of a brain...I even did a few beheadings myself, handed the hatchet by my father as if it were a tribal rite of passage. It was a common sight to watch my Grandma prepare a fresh kill, the boiling water, the stink of the hot feathers being plucked, the evisceration, the different organs fingered and separated. It was hard to think of 'cute' chickens or chickens as friends after all that. But when they bought a fresh batch of chicks...that was a delight. Hundreds of bouncy little furballs cheeping and motoring around. But in a few weeks they were scrubs and runts and beneath contempt.

We also were raising a pig for slaughter. I liked it a lot and named it Daisy. Wasn't much you could do with Daisy, but she was very interesting in her habits, and sometimes acknowledged me in a humorous way.. I liked the feel of her hide and she liked being scratched. But I wasn't keeping close contact with her and her fate until long after she seemed to disappear and we were having breakfast with bacon. My Dad told a friend how good it was to have your own source...and it hit me hard. I was eating Daisy! I blurted it out to the table: "Is this the only way we can get bacon?" and wouldn't touch it after that. When Wahb disappeared I knew...but I had already been conditioned with all the chickens and Daisy...I just swallowed regret and pretended I understood.

KIDS

The nearest kids were in the farm across the road from us, the Andreoli Sisters. They were triplets about five years older than I. Everything about them was storied for me. Just being triplets of course made them legendary. How many people ever know triplets? They were that much older that they could do amazing things, and were protective and kindly to me. The other marvel about them was their farm. Their parents were old-country Italians and the farming was done just as they had done it forever in Italy. They made their own sausage and salami, their own ice cream, and they made wine. It was a long walk for a little guy, down our driveway and then up the road a little and then up their long driveway. Not like finding the Romolo apartment kids. But it was full of smells and stuff to poke around at, and a guaranteed delight at the end. Their mother was wonderful with me. I loved her more than the triplets. Was it the salami? No... it was the way she would sit me down in their kitchen, just her and I, and speak the accented English with a kindness that mesmerized me. I'd sit as if I were her very special and only guest. Then out would come a tray of ice cream. It was made like pudding, a vanilla and condensed milk taste that I still can rekindle with ease. The little squares came out like ice cubes and the texture was dense. We would have a little talk. Then she would slice a piece of their homemade bread and a slice of salami and squeeze them

together...and send me on my way home. I'll never forget this repeated moment: my little self walking on their driveway looking at hay piles to my right, and ahead of me the eucalyptus lining Cypress Ave. Thinking dreamy and reveling in the taste of the salami & bread. I was taking the long overland route from Italy to Cotati.

One of my visits to the Andreolis' was highlighted by a hay-jump. Just below the driveway was a huge pile of hay and we were taking running jumps off the roadbed into it. Wonderful fun, straws in your clothing and impossible to hurt oneself. Suddenly one of the triplets yelled 'SNAKE!' and we all ran to the edge. There in the hay was a huge gopher snake. The sister down in the pile screamed and ran free and we all gathered to watch it slowly disappear down a gopher hole. I felt like I'd seen a python...(Kipling's Jungle Stories was another favorite book).

There were some markers in my mind that had to do with the larger world, with Time. This is the first birthday I really remember. When I turned four there was a little party and I got to wear a sailor suit. I think we ended up making mud pies and the white sailor was no more. Another marker was the New Year of 1948. For some reason I recall everything about that morning. My mother explaining it to me, that a day came, and was called New Year, and we gave a new number to the Time we lived in, and that the new year was called 1948. I remember my bedroom when she left, sitting on my bed and staring at everything in the room, the toys, out the window...and feeling it was a momentous day, that everything was changed because now I knew what 1948 meant. I have a memory too of my parents listening to a Joe Louis fight. That Joe Louis was a Hero on a grand scale. The sound of the announcer, and my Dad leaning into the speaker, riveted.

The outside world also registered when I was taken to a friend-of-ours' farm where I was introduced to a little girl a year or so older than I. She had a foreign name and she was solemn and beautiful. I was told she had had a hard time getting away from the War and that she might stay with these friends of ours. It seemed clear that I was to make friends with her. To make her welcome as a fellow child. We had an awkward hour or so standing around outside under some trees. Her English was pretty good, and she was polite with me. But I can still remember the sense of depth, of gravity, in her person. A clear idea of not having such depth myself. She knew things that we couldn't talk about, even though it was clear that these things were the only reason we had been placed together to 'play'. I still don't know what kind of refugee she was, except that the friends were part of the Jewish community...and that she did not have parents.

It was during this time that my parents noticed I was missing things they would point out to me...and had my eyes tested. I was nearsighted, and had to have glasses. Not all the time, but for distance seeing. This was an early start on the self-consciousness of being a glasses-kid. Years of avoiding them in classrooms or in games.

Sometimes kids were brought to play when the grownups visited: some who were kin and others just friends. My favorite were the cousins Steve & Chris. They brought a great adventuring energy and the fun of siblings which I longed for. Steve was a year older and had developed a love of comic books which he infected me with. His obsession was with Westerns, and living on a farm the cowboy/Indian themes made pretty good sense. I liked Red Ryder and Lash Larue. Steve fixated on The Cisco Kid to the extent that he called himself Cisco, and insisted everyone else call him that too. If you said 'Steve', he wouldn't answer. He had a black Cisco Kid hat with the Spanish motif of a piece of white yarn stitched around the flat brim. And a two-gun holster set...very dashing at five years old.

We were given great latitude in ranging about the farm and I had several episodes of mischief in which I was only barely aware of wrong & right. In one case an older boy was playing with me, and I showed him the old water tower on the property where we stored things. There was a record player there which he & I just destroyed one day, piece by piece. We knew the grownups wouldn't like it, but we didn't know it was 'wrong'. It was just ...interesting. The same sort of thing happened once with the Andreoli girls. I had been given a new tricycle for Christmas(the first present I can remember) and I watched my dad assemble it with pliers and wrenches. I told the Andreolis about it as they were taking turns riding . I felt they were a little jealous of my trike. They wanted to see how it came apart. We got a pliers and I showed them where bolts were and they went at it with excitement. Pretty soon there were only parts lying around, and they went home. I couldn't put it back together myself and had to confess to my father what had happened. I was uncomfortable about this. I felt the wrongness now in the form of my Dad having to do it all over again. That wasn't right. And I felt like the Andreolis had left me with a destroyed brand new gift. That wasn't right either.

I also recall dropping a new bowl and it breaking spectacularly. It was a happy occasion: my Grandma and parents were coming back from the poultry exchange with the news that they had sold their crop of pullets at a fine profit. I think they said they had made a thousand dollars! It was reason to buy a few things, and my mom had bought a Mixmaster set that she had craved. She handed me the milky-white big bowl so I could help, and I carried it as far as the kitchen door and lost control of it. An early memory of guilt. Of course I got yelled at, and these things etch a memory...but there was also the feeling that I had let everyone down at the moment of happiness. Had 'ruined it'.

There was a style of parenting that can already be seen...they not only let me go off unsupervised at a very young age, but also gave me responsibilities that were suited to an older child. I was spoken to as an adult most of the time as well, or at least...I wasn't cooed-at or patronized. That may help to understand why I have so many early memories in which I am sort of disembodied... as if not a child. I seem to have been jolted into a 'street' awareness, a person neither a child nor an adult, by this style. My father liked to tell about how early I understood the difference between a Phillips screwdriver and slotted. He would say, 'hand me the Phillips screwdriver' when I was two, and I'd go get it. My Grandmother was like that as well, but she also indulged me and paid me particular attention. I loved her accent and her Old-Country wit. Sly stories to make a point. "take that spoon out of your cocoa! A boy in my village poked his eye out by trying to drink with the spoon still in the cup!"

At this time I also had my first experience of Jewish religious practice. We were friends with the Marcus family who were benevolent and wealthy people involved with the poultry feed business. Once we went to their house for a Seder. Everything was so much nicer than at our house that I was awed. A big table with nice linen and silverware. And the seriousness of the ceremony was impressive. I had no idea what was happening because my mother's family were anti-religious and thought it was primitive. I was impressed too by the dress of the Marcus boys. They were like little gentleman. We also were invited to their house around Christmas. I think all our friends celebrated Christmas just 'for the kids'. My Grandparents were apparently pretty upset the first time a tree was set up in our house. But it just rolled over everyone as: "when in Rome.." I'm sure the Marcuses observed Hanukkah, but this was definitely Christmas. There was a tree and I was given a nice gift, an Erector set. It amazed me that I could have something so...'scientific'. The Marcus boys had a model railroad and had gotten some other dazzling new toys. It was a sharp feeling of class difference. I knew they were far above us in that tangible kid-to-kid way. Their clothes...and their toys....were out of reach in my lifetime.

A good contrast that year was the Christmas party we went to, hosted by the Piledrivers' Union. The place was jammed with families and I was intimidated by it. I didn't know any of the other kids and my Dad

was chummy with all the other big strong-looking men. I felt tiny. But they all had a nice warmth to them, patting my head and bending over to greet me. Eventually there was a toy distribution, and I was given a sturdy little garden set of Hoe, Rake and Shovel. It seemed perfect for me. I lived on a farm. I could go home and use them the next day. I loved the vegetable garden. My Dad brought wheelbarrows full of chicken manure over to the garden and heaped it along the corn rows. Our corn was enormous...to a five-year-old.

That spring I went into a Kindergarten that we had to drive to. Really my first school experience...the nursery school had ended swiftly. I liked the play area and the little snack of graham crackers and milk, but I could not understand the naptime idea. We had to put our heads down on the desk and go to sleep. It was impossible. It was comforting in a way, but an exhortation to close our eyes and sleep made no sense to me. I was wide awake every time. A few kids really would drop off, but most of us were sneaking looks at each other and squinching our eyes shut when the teacher walked by. It seems to have been a nice time to just think about ...stuff. Another point in consciousness that I can beam right back to: the little mind sitting in a forced darkness and quiet while his heart thumped away and his legs wanted to run and his hands were noodling around the desk...and he felt his solitary wakefulness.

This school also afforded me the first experience of loving a girl. It was Margaret. She was very pretty and liked to sit near me. She had a friend and they kind of teamed around at play time and danced in and out of contact with me. I wanted to always wear my multicolored plaid short-sleeved shirt at school...because of Margaret. I think this is why Teddy kept attacking me with blocks. Play time was a swing between the pleasures of Margaret and the angst of Teddy. It was worth it.

My mother's younger sister, Esther, was taking classes at UC in Berkeley, and often staying with us on the farm. We spent a lot of sweet time together...she was young enough to be a kind of big sister, without the baggage of reprimand and parenting. Like the others, she also spoke to me as if I were her peer, and told me much about science and books. I was in love with dinosaurs and once we were looking at a book together and I said something like that. She told me there was a science of studying them. That it was called paleontology, and that at Berkeley there were such people and they had bones there too. I declared that I too would become a paleontologist. I still feel badly that I broke this important vow...that Esther was my witness and I let her down. She took me one day to the Berkeley building where all sorts of specimens were shelved out in the hallways...preserved creatures, dinosaur bones, huge numbers of these magical things. I was overwhelmed. It seemed to be the world headquarters of knowledge and magical objects. More important that day was the feeling of trust I had with Esther. A long trip together in a car, time to wander about and be guided by her in the Great World.

There was a moment with my mother that etched deeply. We were in my parents' room & I was standing on the bed while she changed my clothes. Something displeased her, maybe I wasn't cooperating. Whatever it was, it escalated to the point where she slapped me. Not a spank, a swat on my body. I was furious. I just hit her right back, in the face. There was a suspended moment, the shock in her face, my own defiant anger...and then she stepped back and the face was 'horrified'. I could see that I'd done something in a new dimension. I recall flashing before me the review: was that Different? Then she started saying "You Hit me, you hit your mother!" I was still standing there unrepentant. Then the tide turned. She said: "I'll be damned, you hit me back. Well. That's the last time I'll ever hit you. That's what this means." She didn't apologize...but she did mark it as the end of an era. Instead of escalating and trying to crush the rebellion, she saw she had gone too far. It was a stand-off. There was a moment in me of pride. The way she had said it made me feel I had won something. In a sense I had...she was always someone who would truly fulminate and rave when angry. But she never hit me again.

My grandmother moved out to live in a cottage on her friends' ranch, and my mother's older sister Lillian moved nearby to a little farm. She and her husband had a little girl my age, Linda... and visiting with her became another rich part of my childhood. Finally I had someone my age to talk about things with, important things. Like, how to fold your toilet paper...or how strong elephants were. A lot of my memories of her center on the times we spent at our Grandma's cottage. I think we were staying over night there occasionally as a babysitting arrangement. We both had great attachments to Tsivye...but we also were mischievous. There was always some sort of combustion between us...the rest of our lives in fact. Little schemes that turned irreverent. I hate to confess some of them...like finding a dead snake and putting it on Grandma's bed. Or deciding to invent something with the household chemicals we found under the sink. Sometimes it was simply ludicrous secret kidstuff.

We were taken to visit the Nitzbergs who were practically family. The older boy was very proud of the farmwork he was doing and showed us around. There were some geese in an old penned-up yard, and he proudly showed us the secret nest he'd found with four huge eggs. His pride got the better of him and he offered to give us one. We were thrilled...and then he said it had to be a secret. So I picked one up and tried to think what we could do. Ways to hide it for the car ride back to Grandma's. Well, the obvious thing was to put it in the front pocket of my baggy jeans. Sure, it just barely did fit into there. But then I had to walk around a little weirdly and be careful not to bump anything. Fine, I could do that. Luckily we were rounded up shortly after to get in the car. I grinned at Linda...we'd succeeded. Now just the short ride home and...and what? Hatch it? I got in the back seat and sat down....and felt a slow crunching in my jeans. Then an oozing wetness.... Oh no. It broke in my pocket. We were very secretive all the way home and I let the grownups go into the house. Then slowly eased out of the car. Linda brought me a spoon and I spooned all the egg slime out of my pocket. Somehow that seemed like the best part, the part that we both knew was going to last, that made it our special secret. The spoon; it was a great idea and enabled me to avoid the confession and the pants coming off and lots of yelling. Of course we never knew what my mom thought when she did the laundry later.

There was a night when our families stayed late at the Carlson's house...and Linda & I shared a grown-up bed. Everything about it was vivid to both of us. We seemed to be floating as adult minds in tiny bodies in a vast bed in the dark. Maybe we had never shared a bed before. What happened was hours of talking. Talking with imagination. We wanted to know what were things that the other was afraid of...and we wanted to trade amazing bits of information. At first it was all about animals. Are you afraid of tigers. Do you know how big an elephant is? As big as that wall? Could it knock the house down? Would it want to? Could it lift a tree? We had discovered that talking about the scary animals this way calmed us down. We were calibrating them, putting them in their places.

Then we got into space...the night sky was just visible above the curtains. How big was it? Could there be an end to it, a big wall where the sky stopped? but then... what would be on the other side of that wall...? One of our parents looked in on us a long time later and we were still talking...they said: "It's midnight kids, go to sleep!" This was the best yet. We were up till midnight! The very word was wonderful, spooky, dark & storied. Midnight. We were intensely proud of this deed, and stayed awake a little longer so we could say..."we stayed up past Midnight!"

When my cousin died a few years ago, this was the memory I kept coming back to. It was a soulful night, a first experience of being with a girl in a kind of marriage. Disembodied, after play, deep into nightcommuning. A template.