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Grandma and the Frenchman

Last Thursday night at writing class, we discussed chapter 1 of *Time Traveler*, by Bruce Henderson, the story of a boy who lost his father at the age of 10 and spent many years thereafter, into adulthood, longing to contact his beloved dad. We focused, quite naturally on the beginning and end of chapter 1, the most important story elements and the best writing of this moving piece. But the part which caught my eye was a simple section on page 2, a section not very important to the story, a sentence included as decoration for the main narrative, a sentence about the main character's grandpa watching TV in the 1950s:

“My grandfather’s favorite pastime became watching women’s roller derby, and he howled in delight whenever a collision sent skaters flying off the track.”

Well! I had watched roller derby. I had watched tough-as-nails Ann Calvello lead the Bay City Bombers in their unrelenting assault against hapless opponents, sending these poor “girls” tumbling helter-skelter over the outer rail into the laps of the screaming Roller Derby fans. And I had watched it on our 12 inch RCA Victor console TV, live from KTLA in far-off Los Angeles. Yes, the *Time Traveler’s* grandpa and I had watched the same organized mayhem at the same time. What a coincidence.

But the image this passage in *The Time Traveler* brought forward from the dusty storehouse of memories locked away in the back of my brain was not of the TV *per se* but of my favorite woman –excepting my mom of course- my beloved grandmother, Lola Edna McGinnis Van Tuyl. Just like the *Time Traveler’s* grandpa, my grandma had sat before the TV paying rapt attention to mayhem being broadcast live to thousands of viewers: Professional Wrestling. She did not sit passively, this was not her style despite the fact her right leg was locked in place straight as a stick and resting on a footstool, the result of a serious auto accident a few years before. In her left hand, resting on the arm of the couch was an ice-filled highball, and in her right hand, or in her perpetually lipsticked mouth, an unfiltered Camel cigarette (“A Blend of Turkish and Domestic Tobaccos”). As the wrestlers enacted their pageant of good-vs-evil (if you were a wrestler you were either a “good guy” or a “bad guy”) my grandma lunged forward or withdrew in sync with the onscreen action, letting out a whoop whenever her favorite guy scored a *coup*.

I was too young to understand the meaning of the word “sexy” but her favorite guy was certainly that. He was the prince of the good-guy wrestlers, a lean and muscular Frenchman clad in leopard-skin trunks, the redoubtable and heroic Andre Dratt. The evil-doers such as the long-haired villain *Lord Blears* or the bottlecap-in-your-eye hooligan *Crusher Carl Carlson*, and even the ethically and sexually ambiguous *Gorgeous George* were no match for the flying Frenchman. Dratt would throw himself against the elastic ringside ropes with a vengeance, and launch his perfect body in a horizontal feet-first attitude toward the hapless *Bad Guy*. No dirty trick or brutal show of force was proof against this elegant human projectile in the leopard-skin trunks. Dratt struck and my Grandma went wild.

It was many years later that I learned the full story of grandmother’s life. Born into urban poverty, she lost her mother in adolescence and suffered at the hands of her “evil” stepmother, who forbade her to read romantic “Yellow-back novels.” She was finally sent to the country to live with her own grandma. Her mind was not yet satisfied when she completed the last year of school in her one-room rural Missouri schoolhouse – the eighth grade- so she took it for a second time. She had an Irishwoman’s love of words which she lavished on the daily crossword puzzle for the rest of her life. And when she saw her beloved son leave for California during the Great Depression she found solace in writing poems, which she mailed to her boy. She had given birth to her first son, my dad, in a dirt-floor log cabin in the Ozarks, and lost her second child, a baby boy, a few years later. Though she was not a descendant of ex-slaves, she surely suffered rural poverty every bit as grinding as that experienced by the *Time Traveler’s* grandfather. She started her adult life as a servant girl, but she rose above her circumstances mainly by force of mind. She was rough-edged in many ways, but a gentle, loving, lady in so many others. She never cursed –and she forced my granddad to stop doing so in my presence- and she would never, ever, no matter how much she wanted to or how much she was egged on, say an unkind word about anyone. When I knew her, her world revolved around her five grandsons, or so it seemed to me, the eldest of these young princes. And when you were in her presence you knew, you were absolutely sure, though she never actually said so, that you were the greatest child ever to walk upon the earth.

So it is strange that I remember her as a stiff-legged vicarious wrestler shouting at the 12-inch RCA Victor console television cheering on her other boy, the fabulous Frenchman Andre Dratt. And I hope they have highballs and Camel cigarettes in heaven where she and Andre now reside, and that she can cheer him on as he battles the forces of evil from On High. It is now more than 100 years since her birth, and more than 50 years since she watched the Frenchman on our TV, but I remember her well, and I was glad to be reminded of her by the passage in *Time Traveler*. I have a time machine built in to my brain, a magic device that lets me visit my grandma whenever I want to, right where she really lives, in my heart.