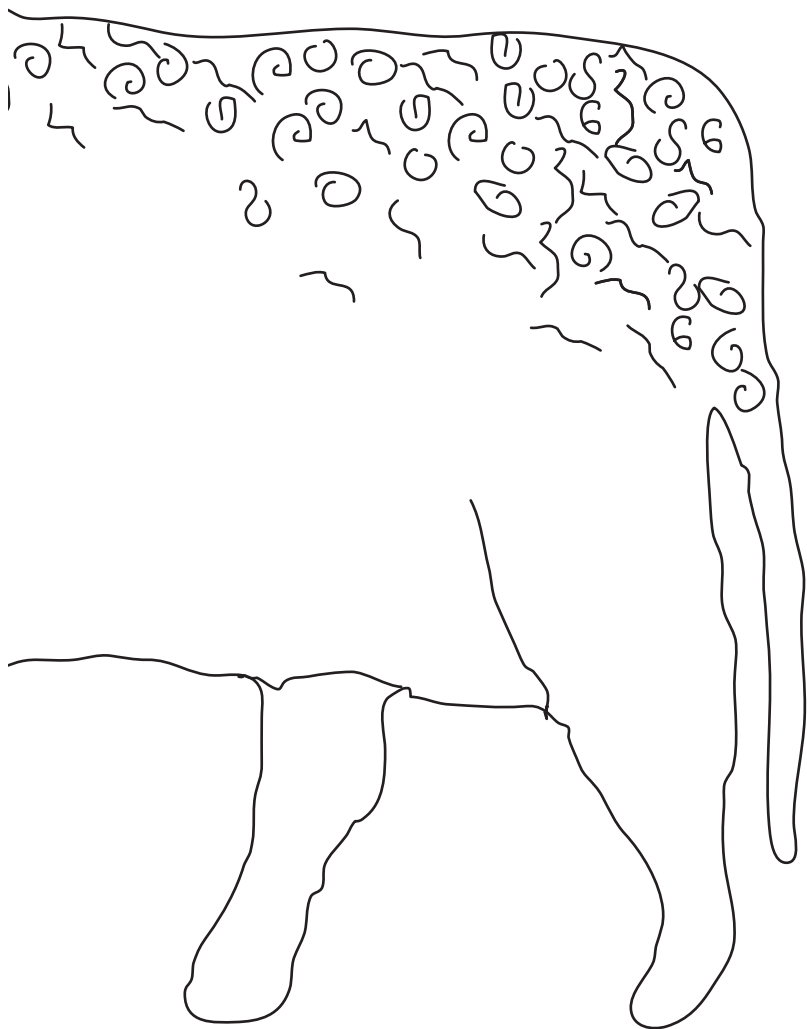


A GLORIOUS KILL & A GRUBBY DEMISE

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Manolo's arse was tight. Each cheek as round and firm as a peach. Clad in fuchsia pink tights with a lycra sheen, I could see every curve, every twitch, every muscular ripple as he strode with breathtaking arrogance into the centre of the arena. The late afternoon sun kissed each jewel-like sequin clinging to his thunderous thighs. But it was Manolo's balls that had me transfixed. Stuffed like plump fruit into that stocking material, this was the proudest display of manhood I had ever witnessed. Yet, these sumptuous things were mere sultanas compared to the bloodied, hacked-off balls he would soon present to me.

It was my seventeenth birthday and this would be the most memorable gift I have ever received. I can still smell it. All these years later, I can still feel the weight of that blood stained parcel as he lifted it high in both hands and held it up to me. I stood up from my front row pew, leaned forward and accepted the magnificent gift. With all the theatrics of the most savvy Mexican matadors, Manolo swooped into a low and lingering bow, with front leg outstretched like a performing colt. The crowd went wild. A thunder of camera flashes blinded the moment as I lowered the heavy thing to lay it out in front of me. I threw open the blood soaked cape and gasped. Not just the beast's balls, but both the ears laid there, dripping, hot and still oozing their life juice. I was overwhelmed with gratitude. This was a glorious kill.

I had never witnessed a bullfight before. And to think I nearly missed it. Initially, I didn't want to go and tried to excuse myself. I was so sure I would be revolted. But this front row privilege had been arranged for me by my Mexican hosts as a special birthday treat and it would have been impolite to refuse. I was young, Catholic,

god-fearing and attention loving. Most of all, I was incapable of being impolite.

I took forever to decide my outfit. What does one wear to a slaughter? Eventually I opted for a demure look: a strapless, cotton summer frock, stockings and high heels. I took a white handkerchief for good measure. I'm sure I'd seen some old movie where women waved white handkerchiefs at the moment of the murder. Maybe this would be my very own white hankie moment.

Before the *corrida de toros* we lunched with the celebrated Matador who, it seemed, only had eyes for me—until his slab of beef arrived. There was a very glamorous woman in our party with straw blond hair, and glittering diamonds across her *décolletage*. She was older than me, stiff, glum and silent. She sat next to an obnoxiously loud and rotund man, old enough to be her father, but clearly wasn't. He kept stuffing his mouth and indicating to her with his fork. 'She hates the *corrida*', he yelled across the table to me. 'She never comes to watch', he said stabbing a fork full of flesh in her direction and then in his gob. Chewing, slurping and still stabbing, he bellowed in a high pitch voice, 'She is sorry for the bull!' Everyone roared laughing. Sorry for the bull!

Glamour girl flicked her hair, tossed her head, and thrust open a book she'd pulled from her Louis Vuitton tote. Fat man now cupped his hand over the side of his greasy mouth, as if he were about to tell me a secret, and said in a loud conspiratorial whisper, 'The killing, it is against her religion. She is not allowed to watch the *corrida*'.

I looked over at glamour girl for some clues. What religion could forbid such a splendid spectacle? She was immersed in reading. I could see on the cover of her book a picture of a blue Shiva-like deity, with

many arms and an elephant head. Perhaps her mystery religion preferred people dance with animals, rather than slaughter them. Either way, glamour girl wasn't coming to witness this magnificent ballet of beast and man.

Two and half decades have passed since that day and still I am in awe of the magnificence of the matador. As a writer and journalist I have long railed against violence, in all its manifestations—but not this. Never this. Bullfighting is a beautiful blood sport. It is all the things its critics have long argued; brutal, barbaric, and cruel. But above all, it is honest. I know of no other arena, stage or cage in which the mighty strength of a marvelous animal is celebrated and appreciated with such gusto as the bullring. Where the animal is truly allowed to be every bit the beast he is. Where the breathtaking moment of man's eyeball to eyeball challenge to a powerful beast is played out with a pretence of performance, but underscored by the stench of fear. It is a deep, primal fear. A genuine fear.

Every intake of the bull's breath is felt by the crowd. Every jab by the picadors; every stab with the banderilleros is felt. You can see a crowd of four thousand wince as one. Gasp at one. Sigh at once. The choreography of a kill, whilst rehearsed for years by the matador, is never the same. Every beast is unique and will see, smell, move and charge according to the individual he is.

The unpredictability of such engagement between man and beast is intoxicating. Will the mammoth thing charge left or right? Will he drop his head? Will he forfeit the fight and succumb to his deft antagonist, or will he go mad with fury? Will he butt the Matador with those terrifying horns, lifting him

into the air, gouging a massive wound in his groin? Will he kill? Or will he turn and charge back into the arena's gate, confused and dazed?

Behind such uncertainty is a purity. Nothing can be planned, nothing is illusion. There is no trick, just skill. The bull is all brute force and animal instinct. Man is clearly the weaker of the two, in body at least. To watch the slow, uncertain and dramatic power-play, as the Matador cajoles, beckons and brings the bull to its knees, is both horrifying and exhilarating.

There is something primal and terrifyingly raw in my lust for that ultimate moment of death. That moment when the dazed and broken animal whose pierced body, with its blood pouring down sweat sodden shoulders, makes one last advance towards the matador. It is then that the erotic arch of the Matador's back bends forward to form a tippy-toe curve. Soon he is but a hollow arch—poised. He inhales, ever so slowly, silently. More tippy-toe balletic motion. Then a perfect, precise plunge forward as his sword slices through the air and in between the bewildered bull's eyes. Its head drops, it shakes. Globes of blood ooze from the nose, the mouth, and fall to the ground in snot balls and saliva. The knees weaken. They collapse. The broken animal drops into the dust. It pants. And pants. Slower. One, two ... three. Then, it is over.

It is over and I am thrilled. The death is fitting. And the moment is life-affirming. I still savour it.

I am in awe of the bull. I do not wish him dead. I wish him well in his life as a bull. And if that life leads to entrapment in an arena, with hordes in the stands baying for his blood then I wish him the best you can wish for such a beast—a great and honourable fight.

I don't hate animals, but I despise our

dishonourable use of them.

Rather than an honest, beastly fight, many animals under human command are subjected to a slow and brutal torture of humiliation and alienation. It is as if the animal spirit is sucked out of them in a cruel effort to reshape them in our own likeness. Why do we do this?

His name might rhyme with 'cute', and Knut the polar bear certainly lived up to it—for a time—but in truth, he was born a zoo freak. No wonder his mother Tosca rejected him and his twin brother. Like so many other captive bred animals, Tosca couldn't relate to these things to which she gave birth in a square concrete pen, within the confines of the Berlin Zoo. There may have been snowcapped Alps painted on the walls, but Tosca wasn't convinced. Or perhaps she was just depressed by the zoo's lousy efforts at home decoration. Whatever it was, Tosca just couldn't get into the zoo spirit of things. The excitement and expectation surrounding her pending birth quite possibly revolted her. After all, birth for a polar bear is a private affair, not a key marketing opportunity, a blow by blow web-blog event, a television extravaganza and a media circus.

When the time finally arrived, Tosca pushed the twin bears out of her heaving belly and out of her life. The weird, wet wriggling bundles must have seemed as unreal and contrived to their mother as the fake snow peaks. Not even the several ice blue hues used to paint the enclosure's pool had Tosca fooled. None of it was even close to resembling the true wild ocean of her own birth. It was all a charade. And so too was this manufactured birth.

The mother-son snub really didn't come as a surprise. Apparently the zoo staff were expecting it. Within hours they knew it was true: the most natural

act of mothering just couldn't be enacted in this most unnatural habitat. Tosca gave the impression she couldn't have cared less if her newborn keeled over and died. So, one of the twins did. But Knut hung in there, with the help of bottle feeding and oodles of human handling. Just what a mighty polar bear cub needs, really.

With Tosca behaving in such a 'callous' and 'unnatural' way toward her newborn, she became an object of shame and derision. She was no longer the pride of the zoo, but the rather terrible Tosca took on the worst mantle a woman can wear—she became known as a 'bad mother'.

Meanwhile Knut was in need of love and care. So his keeper took to playing his guitar and singing him songs. That will do it. That's just what an abandoned and stressed baby polar bear needs, a bit of badly crooned Elvis Presley. And of course Knut had to have a favourite—a toss up perhaps between *Love me Tender* and *Hound Dog*.

The ever so cute Knut and his sad story of abandonment struck a cord with the public—with a little PR help from the zoo. They came in their thousands to watch the cute little cuddly cub put on a daily show with his human handler.

Soon word of the fluffy little survivor captured major media headlines. There were television documentaries, DVD's, songs, toys, logos, even a raspberry flavoured *Cuddly Knut* line of lollies. The German mint produced a special commemorative silver Knut coin, and the government featured the little bear on its Environment Ministry logo.

It wasn't long before little Knut shot to world fame, thanks to the good fortune of bad publicity. A shamefully misreported interview with an animal rights activist, who suggested Knut should have been

ethanased at birth after being rejected by his mother, suddenly galvanised animal lovers. The howls of protest echoed across the globe. Children mounted rowdy demonstrations outside the zoo, waving placards declaring their love and adoration for little Knut. The media trucks arrived for live television coverage, spawning countless broadcast debates about the virtues of captive breeding, and the phenomena of mother-bear rejection.

And all the while they kept coming, soon in their hundreds of thousands, pouring through the Berlin Zoo gates, hoping to catch a glimpse of the most famous animal on earth. Children squealed with delight, as the Elvis crooning Thomas rolled and cajoled the cub and ratcheted up the cuteness factor.

Hot on the heels of the frenzied publicity, Hollywood came knocking. Knut was photographed by Annie Leibovitz for the cover of *Vanity Fair* magazine, which proclaimed him an 'International Superstar'. Adopted as the pin-up boy for environmentalists in the fight against global warming, the little polar bear shared his second *Vanity Fair* cover with none other than Leonardo DiCaprio.

It was a spectacular shoot, with glamour boy DiCaprio on location at the Jokulsarlon glacier lagoon, in southeast Iceland. On the cover, sweet little Knut looked up longingly at the heroic DiCaprio as the two of them seem to balance precariously on a tiny slither of ice, surrounded by mint-blue waters and melting glaciers. You could almost see the bubble above dear little Knut's fluffy white head; 'Leo, please help me. Make them stop warming the globe and melting the ice. Please help all the cute, cuddly baby bears like me, and save our natural habitat.'

It was a celebrity, star-studded call to arms. All animal-loving environmentalists heard the message. It's just a pity they ignored the animal. And Vanity Fair did more than guild the lily on this one. Whilst the image was all about the cute polar bear in his natural habitat, poor little Knut didn't actually get within cooe of an Icelandic glacier. He didn't get to smell the polar air, or dip his paw into those icy waters. The shoot was a fake. Everyone else got to go to the North Pole for the photographic extravaganza, except the polar bear. He had to stay home, confined to his zoo pen with its painted snow peaks, fake icicles and grubby pool.

The entire roll of cute Knut shots were taken inside his concrete prison and photographed with iron bars and bricks in the background. The photo of Knut was then superimposed on the sliver of ice with DiCaprio—who has probably never laid eyes on the little bear. But for the sake of global warming and glamour—they made a handsome team. Not to mention a most profitable cover shot.

And there was no doubting Knut's ability to shine a dime. In its 160 year history, the Berlin Zoo had never experienced visitor numbers like this. Soon they were pouring through the turnstiles at the rate of fifteen hundred a day to see and coo at Knut. He quickly became a licence to print money. The Zoo locked in its ownership of the polar cub mania by registering Knut as a trademark, and immediately the Zoo's share price doubled. Before the bear was one, the Zoo had turned around its fortunes with a five million euro profit.

But all that's well doesn't necessarily end well. Baby animals grow up and like humans they get fat, lazy and dirty. Knut got so fat he was put on a fat-free diet. He got so lazy and dependent he was banned from having any further human handling, and his daily

'shows' were cancelled. He got so dirty that his once lovely white coat turned grey and grotty.

Before long the visitor numbers dropped off. The media attention dropped off. The Knut merchandising dropped off. And the Knut phenomena faded. The cute bear fascination moved on.

Gosh, things must be bad when even Australian breakfast television hosts Mel and Kokie are turning up their noses at Knut, the once ever so cute little critter. 'Knut is in therapy', said Mel, 'He got big and fat'. But when reminded by her side-kick newsreader that she, Mel, used to have a 'soft spot' for Knut, Mel replied with aplomb, 'Yeah, but he got big and dirty'. And the big, blond, whale of a girl surprised no-one when she said 'I like them when they're white and fluffy and cute. No, Knut is over. I like Snowflake now. He's so cute'.

Yes, it was true. Knut's star had bombed, and Snowflake's was on the rise. Born to another German zoo, this new, gleaming white, little baby bear they dubbed 'Snowflake' had all the sweet charm and cuddly lovability that Knut had lost. So as Mel said, 'Knut is over'. That's it. Red-rover.

But don't think for a moment that Knut was ok about being dumped. Don't think the uninterrupted peace of celebrity bear retirement tuned him on. Instead, it turned him mad. Really mad. Knut couldn't cope without an audience. He threw tantrums, howling like a baby and whimpering for attention. Soon, the only means of placating the bellowing Polar bear was by crowding zoo staff in front of this pen, where they would pretend to coo. Before long a German zoologist dubbed him an 'animal psychopath' who was 'addicted to human beings'.

Maybe that misreported animal welfare activist was on to something. Maybe Knut should have been

euthanased at birth and thereby saved the humiliation and ignominy of a celebrity's fall from grace.

But of course, not all dirty, old animals fall from grace or grandeur. Some go to their grave more beloved, and more sorely missed than any humans. After all, many an animal takes the place of that friend or lover you never had. And best of all, Pussy and Puppy never complain.

That's the beauty of purchased pet love—it comes unconditionally. Other than eager expectations of a daily feed, the demands are little. Pets never point out your deficiencies as a human being, your failings as a friend, or how tediously repetitious your diatribe can be after that third glass of shiraz. They never show you up; dress you down; or insist you try harder. They don't nag you about those clothes on the floor, or dishes in the sink. You may be a fat failure who farts, who will never reach your goals, or achieve your potential—your pet doesn't care. Pet love means you never have to say sorry, even if you're a prize slob.

I have never had a pet. Not because I don't suffer hopeless deficiencies and a yawning need for unconditional love. It's just that I'm too embarrassed to admit it—or indeed parade it.

Besides, what would I do with a pet? Pat it? Set it down and say hello. Show it around the joint. Here's your bed, your bowl, and by the way, the bathroom is shared. Then what? Perhaps a stroll down my street—a sort of meet and greet with the neighbours. Maybe a latte at my local. Or perhaps a bit of shopping. My friend on a leash, and me leading the way. Surely everyone would see the capital P hovering above my purchased pet. P for pretend. This is no friend. It's simply pretence and pretend.