

Serpent

Yesterday at the New York Zoo, officials reported a trespasser. A worker tried to remove a chanting foreigner who had positioned himself on a rug in front of the cobra exhibit to no avail. Leaving for just a minute to get help, the staff found the man gone, and no trace as to where he went. The search for the foreigner is still ongoing.

The New York Times, 1916

I

Jim moved slowly to the king cobra cage, lifting a squirming mouse from a wooden box. Almost as if the small rodent knew what its purpose in life was, it shook violently and squealed as Jim opened a small door in the side of the snake's cage and thrust the mouse in through the opening.

Karen, who was making the feeding rounds with Jim that morning, looked at the mouse scurry in a hopeless attempt to escape. She was in training for this job so her expression did not change. This was the true workings of Mother Nature and she was being trained to live in this world of apparent cruelty.

"What do you think the Germans'll do?" Jim asked as he looked away from the death stalk in the cage.

"What?" She sounded surprised at first.

"You know; the Germans, the ones who seem to be invading everybody over there in Europe," Jim added

"Oh, yes, I'm sorry, my mind is on something else," She focused on what he had asked. "I worry a lot about it and I hate all those little wars they always seem to have, so many get killed about so little."

"So little?" Jim laughed. "Every time they fight one of those little wars, the map of Europe changes; somebody gets rich, and somebody gets awful poor."

Karen shook her head and moved towards the next cage. “Do you think we’ll get mixed up in this war?”

“Do you mean one of their wars?”

“Yes, that’s what I mean, it would be terrible to send our soldiers so far away for nothing.”

“Nothing?” Jim sounded indignant. “I was in the army when we went against Spain, and it wasn’t for nothing. Those Spaniards would’ve loved to move right back into Florida, we showed them what for.”

Karen stared at him for a moment, then she looked at the next snake cage.

“And, don’t forget,” Jim continued, “the map changed that time too, and we weren’t on the losing end at all.”

“I suppose so, but I never did like wars anyway,” She quietly replied, not wanting to escalate the rhetoric. “But sometimes they are necessary.”

Jim shook his head in agreement. “Sometimes they are.”

Karen didn’t respond.

Jim handed the container of mice to Karen as he spoke, “You do this one, you are supposed to be learning the job, even though it’s only for the Summer.”

“I hope you don’t mind that,” Karen said as she took the container of mice and opened the feeding door. “I do love working with animals and I’ve been on my own for a long time.”

“No, I don’t mind,” Jim paused. “That’s why they gave you to me to train. Some of the others feel that women shouldn’t even work, let alone do a man’s job.”

“I know I may seem a little too forward for a woman, by being here, in this job, but I really have been on my own for more years than you might believe,” Karen paused, looking at Jim’s inquisitive expression. “The couple who raised me were the nicest folks I’ve ever met, and they did love me, but they did not have enough money to raise their own children, let alone a distant relative like me so I started working to help support

myself when I was only twelve. I've worked my way through college so far, and I hope to continue on to get my doctorate."

"You are an unusual woman and I admire your high goals," Jim paused for a second. "It must be rough going."

"It is, but I have had help from time to time," She replied with a slight grin. "You've been a great help to me in this new job."

Jim shrugged his large shoulders and looked at Karen. "Who else helped you?"

"Dr. Jenkins got this job for me, he told me I should do this before I enter graduate school in the Fall," Karen said almost apologetically. "I really do love working with animals."

"You don't have to explain to me, I don't mind women working in here. My mother worked for years for Dr. Jenkins before she moved down South to live with my aunt." Jim proudly said.

"Oh, what did she do for Dr. Jenkins?"

"At first she was a maid, but he trained her to prepare food for the animals; she loved that a lot."

"I think that is grand," Karen said. "I really do admire Dr. Jenkins, he acts so distant, and cold, but I think he must be a genuine person at heart."

"I guess so, but none of us has seen that side of him yet," Jim laughed.

Karen pulled another noisy mouse from the container and forced it through the feeding door in the snake cage. She slowly walked to the next exhibit cage, and did the same task.

"What was all that about the distant relatives who raised you?" Jim asked.

"I grew up with my mother's first cousin and his wife, they were the only family I had after my father died."

Jim fell silent for a second. "Oh, I'm sorry."

“I don’t mean to put people off when I tell them I was an orphan, but it did happen.”

“It seems so sad,” Jim paused, “I mean losing your parents seems so bad.”

“I was very small, and the people who raised me are my parents; they love me, and I feel they’re my parents now, after this long.”

“That’s good,” Jim said, not knowing what else to say on that subject. “What do you think about the Austrians? Do you think they’re the real power in Europe still?”

“I really do not think so,” Karen half grinned at Jim. “I think the Hapsburgs had their last fling at power seventy five years ago, or so, but not anymore.”

“I think so too, it’s those Germans I don’t trust.” Jim said as he emphatically shook his head. “I hope, for their sake, they don’t try anything with us; they’ll not soon forget it, like those Spaniards.”

Karen moved to the next cage and reached into the box for another hapless mouse. “To change the subject, Who was that strange man who came in here yesterday?”

“Who? I think a lot of strange people come in here,” Jim chuckled at his own joke.

“That man who stared at the king cobra’s cage for so long, and who talked to himself.”

“Oh, that fellow.” Jim’s eyebrows raised slightly. “He gave me the willies.”

“How? Who is he?” Karen asked.

“We don’t know, but he’s been coming here for about six months. At first, he would only pause by the cage, then he would stay longer and longer. When there’s no one else in the reptile area, he clasps his hands together and bows to the snake, and mumbles. When there’s a crowd, all he does is bow quickly to it, mutter a phrase or two, and quickly walk out.”

Karen looked surprised. “Why does he do that?”

“We don’t know, he doesn’t do anything wrong, and we are open to the general public. I guess one of us should have asked him what he’s doing, but we never have.”

“I would,” Karen thought for a moment. “But I guess it might be dangerous if I did.”

“You’re darn right it would be dangerous for a woman, I told you that fellow gives me the willies.”

“When does he come here?” Karen asked.

“Any time now, he makes it here right after morning feeding time, every day we’re open.”

Karen quickly turned her head to her left and stared at the large open door to the reptile exhibit. The golden morning light cut into the building in precise blocks. Three forms melted through the light, and emerged, one by one, into the dusty room. Each shadow figure moved slowly to one of the long rows of exhibit cages.

“That’s the last one for this building,” Jim said to Karen in a hushed voice. “We need to get the meals for the next group of hungry inmates, then get on with our rounds.”

“Is one of them the snake man?” Karen asked.

“Yes, the man in the dark overcoat,” Jim whispered as he nodded in the direction of a man slowly walking towards them.

“I understand what you said about him.” Karen handed the empty mouse container to Jim. “He gives me the willies too.”

“I’m glad you agree, now, let’s get going,” Jim insisted.

“No,” Karen hesitated. “You go on and get the food, I’m going to hide here by the exit and watch what he does.”

“No, I have to insist that you come with me; I’ll worry about your safety, and you’re my responsibility,” Jim continued to insist.

“No,” Karen looked straight into Jim’s eyes. “I’m responsible for myself, I have been for quite some time, and I’m going to stay right here and look at what that strange man’s doing. I am safe, and I do not need protection, thank you though.”

Jim sighed and looked annoyed at her. “What if he sees you and means you harm?”

“I promise that I’ll stay right here by the exit. If he comes towards me, I’ll rush right out, and get you, or some of the other attendants.”

“Well,” Jim paused. “If you promise to meet me in the next building in five minutes anyway, I don’t suppose anything can really happen in that short of a time.”

Jim glanced one more time at the snake man, then at Karen before he opened the door, and walked out. The large door closed behind Jim with a loud clank, echoing throughout the reptile hall.

A tall man, forty two years old, with thinning gray hair, walked slowly to the king cobra cage. He looked in two opposite directions and observed the position of the two other patrons; he was alone with the snake. The man clasped his hands together and closed his eyes. Placing a small rug, he had hidden under his coat, on the floor, he fell to his knees for a brief stay, then he quickly rose to a standing position. His head remained bowed, his eyes remained closed, and his hands remained tightly clasped together.

“King of the fallen, king of the kings, I dwell in your house, westward of man, and still within grace,” The man spoke very softly, in a low monotone voice, beginning to rock almost imperceptibly back and forth.

“We are of one spirit, of this place and entwined in time. Come, may we two dance the dance of life together,” He spoke in a quicker pace, a sing song fashion.

“Alone, we now are together, and shall be alone again, yet never apart.”

The man opened his eyes, wider than normal and stared into the cage at the large snake, gulping the last of the mouse past his gaping jaws. The man quickly darted his eyes to his left, noticing a young woman staring at him from twenty feet away. He

straightened himself up, and fell silent. He continued the slow rocking motion, and returned his eyes to the large snake.

The woman stopped, turned, and quickly walked back through the same door through which she had entered.

The man opened his eyes and stared at the snake, which moved slowly to the front of the cage, rising up, facing the man.

“I come to you, you come to me, and we shall be one.” The man said quietly.

Karen remained in the short hallway, leading to the exit farthest from the snake man, straining to make out what the man was saying. There was one other man in the reptile house now, besides the snake man who stared at the king cobra cage for a moment from his position near the far exit, then he too left.

The snake man looked in both directions, pausing twenty seconds for each turn of his rocking head; the cobra assumed the same rocking motion as the man. The snake looked in the same directions as the man, and turned his gaze in unison with the man.

The two animals slowly turned towards each other and fixed their eyes to the other.

Karen quickly looked around the corner of the short hallway she had been standing in and looked at the silent man in front of the cage.

The man began a low hum, rising slowly in pitch; he and the snake swung the quickening circular motion together.

“May man feel your mercy, may I feel your heart and the chill of your blood,” The man chanted as he raised his hands above his head, his humming becoming louder. He rocked almost in a circular pattern; the snake matching his every movement.

Karen looked again around the corner of the hallway. Inside the cage were two serpents, twisted together, raised as high as the cage would allow, rocking in a wide circular motion; the two heads facing each other, transfixed in their gaze.

Karen placed her hand over her mouth, took in a deep breath and ducked quickly back into her hiding place in the hallway. Tears started to come to her eyes, more from fear than anything else. Karen forced herself to turn immediately and reach for the door. She knew she must get to Jim, or another attendant as soon as possible.

The light streaming in through the door was blackened as she reached for the door knob. Karen stuck her hand directly into a man's stomach. The momentum of her lunge for the door propelled her into the man's arms.

Karen still had her right hand over her mouth as she screamed; her shout was muffled by her own hand. The man grabbed her by her shoulders and stepped to her left.

"I'm sorry I frightened you, my dear, let me open the door for you." He moved back, and pushed the door open, then stood half outside, holding the open door for Karen.

"The time is right; you have seen, but no one shall believe. Man is on the brink, and you have seen the way." The man opened his eyes wide and stared at Karen with his slit golden serpent's eyes. "You have seen and shall always remember, you shall feel the glorious chill."

Noted Biologist, Karen Weller passed away this last Saturday.

Services will be held sometime next week

The New York Times, 1974

II

"Dr. Weller." The young woman in the starched white lab coat opened the door.

"Dr. Weller, are you in here?"

"Yes, Jane, I'm over here by the cages, I'm trying to pack some things over here.""

A slender woman in her mid seventies stood up and half raised her hand to signal her location amidst a cluttered collection of old laboratory equipment and books.

"I know, remember, I said I would be by this afternoon to help you," The young woman responded as she made her way to the far corner of the office.

"I wish Dr. Billings would have let me keep this office, but they needed it for that new high paid research professor they just hired," Karen Weller said.

"I don't think that it's fair at all, you've been in this office for more than forty years, and the university owes you something for that, at least the use of it for a few more years," Jane said with a slightly indignant tone. "I don't see why the university treats someone who won so many honors for interspecies communication research so poorly."

"This is prime office space now," Karen observed as she looked out the window. "It wasn't when I first moved in here, but now..." Her voice trailed off.

"Well, it's not like they sent you to Mars," Jane interrupted. "You'll be in the same complex at least."

"I suppose so, but it just won't seem the same," Karen sighed.

"Well," Jane clapped her hands together, "Let's get at all this packing."

"It's done."

"What?" Jane looked around the room. "I don't understand."

"This box I just finished packing is all I'm taking with me. I gave the rest of the books to the library, and all the rest of it goes wherever the department wants; but not to the closet of an office they gave me, and it certainly won't fit into my small apartment."

"Just that one small box?" Jane pointed to the carton on Karen's lap.

"This, and my pet," Karen replied as she patted the large cage.

"You never would leave your friend."

"Never," Karen slowly stood, and handed the box of books to Jane. "Could you take these, and I'll get our friend."

Karen walked to the window, moved a few items and reached down to grab a large metal cage.

"Ever since I've known you, you've carried that with you everywhere," Jane said as she walked to the door with the small box of books.

"I've had this cage, and it's passenger with me since 1916." Karen said nodding.

"Not the same one," Jane scolded as she walked into the hall. "They don't live that long."

Karen paused inside the office as the door fell shut behind Jane, who continued down the hall. Karen lifted the cage and looked into the golden snake eyes of the gently rocking reptile.

"Oh, yes we do; so many years, my love, until the end of time. I have found another voice, another soul for you," Karen whispered as she lowered the cage, opened the office door, and passed into the hall.