

The Origin of Zoos

by

Michael Bettencourt

67 Highwood Terrace #2, Weehawken NJ 07086

201-770-0550 • 347-564-9998 • michaelbettencourt@outlook.com

<http://www.m-bettencourt.com>

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DESCRIPTION

Early 20th-century American jitters about democratic and racial survival makes the Lower East Side either a genetic cesspool or a political success.

CHARACTERS

- Madison Grant, 48
- Margaret Sanger, 33
- Walter, a waiter and store owner, older, Polish

MISCELLANEOUS

- Modest sound design
- Modest set requirements

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A coffee shop near Seward Park, 1913, late in the day, winter.

SOUND: The voices of children playing in the park.

MADISON GRANT sits at a table, journal in front of him, fountain pen, mug of coffee. WALTER sits to one side, reading his newspaper.

MARGARET SANGER comes in, beating her arms against herself to warm herself up. She wears fingerless mittens.

SOUND: A small bell to indicate someone has entered.

WALTER puts down his paper.

SANGER

A mug, and hot, and black, like usual, Walter.

WALTER

On the way, Mrs. Sanger, like usual.

WALTER goes off. SANGER sits.

SANGER

I haven't seen you in here before.

GRANT

I haven't been here to be seen.

SANGER

And writing, no less.

WALTER comes back with a mug of coffee and a small basket of bread.

SANGER

Oh, Walter, thank you, but I can't pay you for the bread.

WALTER

It's day-old, if you don't mind—it's to you or the birds. Better to you.

SANGER

You're always too kind.

WALTER

You do good work for us around here.

SANGER

And you are a gentleman without equal.

WALTER looks at GRANT.

WALTER

Sir?

GRANT

I'm fine, thank you.

WALTER goes back to his paper. SANGER guzzles and eats.

SANGER

Can you hear that?

GRANT

Hard not to.

SANGER

That is the sound of health—children screaming in play. So.

GRANT

Is this an interview?

SANGER

Maybe. Let me observe first. Leatherbound journal and a Waterman pen. Your coat glows with warmth, unlike my threadbare rug. I'll imagine soft buttery leather gloves in the pockets—not like my knitted monstrosities. These are not the specs of the Lower East Side, of Seward Park and Hester Street and its environs.

GRANT

I'm doing research.

SANGER

On?

GRANT

The waiter—

SANGER

Walter—

GRANT

Walter—

SANGER

You're researching him?

GRANT

No.

SANGER

You should.

GRANT

He thanked you for doing good work. What might that be?

SANGER

I answer you, you answer me?

GRANT

That's one way we could arrange it.

SANGER

Has a stuffy sort of wit—add to list.

SANGER holds up her mug.

SANGER

Walter, may I renew my subscription?

WALTER

Of course. Sir?

GRANT

I will be renewed as well.

WALTER takes both of their mugs away.

SANGER

Research. You published anything?

GRANT

I've written about caribou. And moose. The Rocky Mountain mountain goat. Life in Alaska.

SANGER

What now—the Lower East Side as wildlife preserve?

GRANT

That's an interesting way to put it. Isn't it that, though—a zoo of sorts?

WALTER comes backs with a tray bearing two mugs of coffee and two small plates of cookies.

WALTER

Because something sweet makes the cold go better. Kolaczki [koh LOTCH key].

SANGER bites into one and loves the taste.

SANGER

I choose to be your kind of Polish for this moment! These are excellent.

GRANT bites into one and finds himself surprised at how good it is.

GRANT

My compliments.

WALTER is pleased.

WALTER

I have to go put things away. We'll be closing up soon.

WALTER leaves. SANGER eats another.

SANGER

Now this is something a caribou could never do. Or even a moose—no opposable thumbs to tie an apron or roll out the dough.

GRANT

Not to mention fitting a chef's hat over the antlers.

SANGER

I've written things, too—articles about sex entitled "What Every Mother Should Know" and "What Every Girl Should Know"—for the New York Call.

GRANT

Socialist publication—just an observation, not a [judgment]—

SANGER

I'd use "common-sensical" and "rational" for my adjectives—but we have different gloves covering our hands, don't we, so—

GRANT

What is it that they should know—your audience?

SANGER

Is there a Missus—

GRANT

Grant—no.

SANGER

Is there a girlfriend Grant?

GRANT

Is there a Mister Sanger?

SANGER

There's one around but in name only these days.

GRANT

No girlfriend Grant, then, in name or body.

SANGER

So how could I begin to tell you what the women should know when you don't know any women? Your mother, I presume, but still.

GRANT

Presumably what a mother should know is what a father should know as well—my sex doesn't disable my ears or brain.

SANGER

Hmm.

GRANT

Or are fathers an obstacle for you?

SANGER doesn't answer, muses.

GRANT

Do you have children?

SANGER

Do you?

GRANT

Even without a Mrs. Grant around I suppose I could—but I don't.

SANGER

That you know of.

GRANT

Some things I know with a high degree of certainty.

SANGER

With a high degree of certainty I have two—sons—Stuart and Grant. A daughter—Peggy.

GRANT

And a husband that's around in name only—Sanger, right?

SANGER

Sanger—my—evanescent husband. Change of topic. Did you wander through the playground?

GRANT

I did.

SANGER

Do you know that when they opened this place ten years ago, the kids jumped over the fence to get in? Two hundred coppers couldn't stop the tidal wave—eager, hungry to get out of their filthy apartments and—

GRANT

I know the people who designed this park—

SANGER

Ah—in those circles.

GRANT

I knew Mayor Low, I know Mayor Mitchel.

SANGER

Circles within circles—

GRANT

I don't disagree that this is a good thing for the lower classes—good for them to have a way to control their behavior, exercise their judgment.

SANGER picks up her coffee and cookies and moves to GRANT's table.

SANGER

Have you been to the library?

GRANT

Yes.

SANGER

Did you see the line of kids waiting to get into the children's reading room?

GRANT

I counted at least sixty.

SANGER

And that's at the low end on a slow day. The reading area—on top of the building?

GRANT

Like an Italian terrazzo.

SANGER

That is the kind of zoo worth having. It should even be a bigger zoo, in my eyes. But I suspect—not your kind of zoo.

GRANT

Were your articles shocking? Not much that's shocking about a caribou, but I imagine—

SANGER

Some cancelled their subscriptions.

GRANT

Protesting what?

SANGER

It's dangerous to talk about sex in this country.

GRANT

Yet—

GRANT points out towards the playground.

GRANT

It's all some people can think about doing—thus we build playgrounds among the slums and keep building the buildings that then become the slums.

SANGER

You got a fear about that?

GRANT

Yes, I “got” a fear about that—about the breeding—yes, of course. What civilized person wouldn't?

SANGER

Breeding—very Charles Darwin that word.

GRANT

I confess to its use. We are a Darwin creature, after all. A thinking animal, an animal with doubts—animal, like it or not.

SANGER

We're all on a monkey honeymoon, eh?

SANGER makes a funny rendition of a monkey, then leans back in her chair, munches on a cookie.

SANGER

I work at Henry Street Settlement on, of course, Henry Street. As a nurse.

GRANT

“You do good work around here” I've heard tell—

SANGER

Something I can do well enough.

GRANT

Though it must be like shoveling sand against the incoming tide.

SANGER

What I tell my mothers—in print and by voice—is to make sure, first, that they aren't ignorant about sex, and then, second, to make sure their children aren't ignorant about sex.

GRANT

Your articles.

SANGER

That is a lot of sand to shovel.

GRANT

The puritan mind comes in all sizes.

SANGER

But you want to talk about really shoveling sand, try to deal with the unwanted pregnancies and the home-made abortions—that's my biggest worry. Blood-soaked sheets, infections, death.

GRANT

So you want them to be safe—

SANGER

Of course.

GRANT

To have children they want—

SANGER

Of course!

GRANT

Or even not to have children if they want, I would imagine.

SANGER

Their bodies, their choices—morally, medically—

GRANT

So, to conclude, it would be better to have in the world only those children that should be in the world. I agree.

SANGER

Why—why does that sound like you're agreeing with something I didn't say?

GRANT

The only thing I would add to what you say is that, to me at least, the people you care for at Henry Street Settlement are not the people to be having the children that are being had.

SANGER makes the monkey sound again, though this time with contempt.

SANGER

Like breeding in the monkey house, right?

GRANT

Well, yes—up in the Bronx we do control how and when all the animals mate—keeps the stock strong.

SANGER

You work at the zoo?

GRANT

I'm one of the founders, so I guess I work there—as secretary of the New York Zoological Society.

SANGER

I get it now, the caribou, the moose—

GRANT

It's what I do, what I study.

SANGER

Now it's the American herd.

GRANT

I'd take your idea of contraception one step further, Mrs. Sanger, avoid the whole thing about their choice altogether—what matters is what keeps the race strong. Besides, who knows what people here really want, especially when life's pressures down here are so great? Relieve them of choice and make their hard lives better.

SANGER gets up and moves around. Unknown to either of them, WALTER appears in the doorway.

SOUND: The children's voices ring out.

SANGER

I've seen many dead women who shouldn't be dead—or who are scarred inside, crippled in their parts.

GRANT

Because of this imperative to breed. The intersection of caribou and man, yes? So why not apply our intelligence and make it better for the women you want to protect?

SANGER

What do you think of Walter? Our waiter.

GRANT

He seems nice enough.

SANGER takes a chair and sits in it backwards, like a man would.

SANGER

I saved his wife. From a self-induced abortion. Eighth child, with four living. And he stood by me while I ministered what I could—not the usual male-of-the-species thing where he blamed her for what the two of them had done. No more children if this is what it does, he said to me.

WALTER

She's more kind than she should be.

SANGER

Walter! I'm—

WALTER

I was being a beast, and not a good beast. Breeding.

GRANT

You said only four living—what happened—

SANGER

Being birthed in this dirt is not a good roll of the dice for kids.

GRANT

Or there is another explanation.

SANGER

Your Bronx solution?

GRANT

The weakest of the herd should be—well, how else to say it? We are a Darwin animal—even as you—

SANGER

That's barbaric—

WALTER

They were weak.

SANGER

Don't listen to him!

WALTER

You know what kind of weak the living ones are—you're a nurse—you see—

SANGER

Walter—

WALTER

I was coming to say I'll be taking your mugs. I have to go finish up.

WALTER leaves.

SANGER

Walter! What are you trying to—

GRANT

What goes for a herd of moose goes for the herd of human beings—the imperatives are the same, to breed the best, the strongest—

SANGER

That's your research?

GRANT

I'm planning a book.

SANGER

So this place is another zoo to you?

GRANT

As it is to you.

SANGER

But I mean “zoo” as a place of chaos—

GRANT

If you allow an animal to outbreed its resources, then that’s what you [get]—

SANGER

I mean because of how this country chooses to arrange resources—who gets what and who gets left out.

GRANT

But I mean “zoo” as a place where the future of the race gets decided—

SANGER

The “race”—

GRANT

You’d deny the human races?

SANGER

No—no one does—but—

GRANT

Then it’s a question of do the best survive, or do we become overrun by those who should not be protected from what nature needs to do? Your children or Walter’s children, to bring it down to cases? I mean, he is Polish, from the Slavic branch of the race—far down from the Nordic—

But something in SANGER’s face stops GRANT. It is late afternoon now. WALTER comes back, collects the mugs and plates.

WALTER

I have to close up—supper, I have to get the supper—

SANGER goes to help WALTER, but he gently indicates “no” and does the gathering himself.

WALTER

My children love this park. It gives them healthy lungs. And I will take them home and cook for them.

GRANT

Your wife—

WALTER

In Calvary Cemetery.

GRANT

Catholic.

SANGER

I couldn't stop the infection. Maybe her death certificate should read “stock comma space inferior.”

WALTER says nothing, takes the dishes. GRANT says nothing. SANGER says nothing. GRANT shuts his journal, puts away his pen.

SANGER

When is this book coming out?

GRANT

It will be a while yet. But I will get it published—that won't be a problem.

SANGER

And then the zoos will begin.

GRANT

You spoke about “chaos.” Wouldn't your work be more—effective if those who shouldn't breed didn't breed?

SANGER

But it can't be legislated.

GRANT

But it can. And it should. And it will.

WALTER comes back, coat and hat on, keys in hand. SANGER gathers up her stuff. WALTER walks up to GRANT.

WALTER

He's right, you know, Mrs. Sanger. It comes out of our bones.

SANGER

You didn't slog yourself from Lodz to America to—

WALTER

I have to go—sorry—

They move to a different part of the stage—

SOUND: Bell on the closing door.

They are now outside.

SOUND: Children's voices abound.

WALTER touches the brim of his hat, leaves. SANGER and GRANT stand there, not sure what to do. GRANT pulls out butterleather gloves and puts them on.

GRANT

On my father's side is Richard Treat—came to New England as one of the first Puritan settlers. They—hoped that here—well, that they'd find perfection—the perfection of themselves. Themselves made better—and better through time. I see my work as their work—I'd like to think it might be the common work we do, our national work.

SANGER

What did you find for your research today?

GRANT

What did you find in yours?

SANGER

That you are a dangerous man.

GRANT

And I'll say, What are your birth control efforts but what I want, just in a different form? I'm not dangerous—what's dangerous is doing nothing, or worse, letting people think they are something they aren't. This place is a zoo, it's a wonderful zoo, a great experiment in many ways—your Walter, for instance—but it shouldn't be allowed to be the future of the country.

SANGER

So I guess you'd count this a great day.

GRANT

Productive.

SANGER

I have my own herd to get home to.

GRANT

Would you like me to escort—

SANGER

I'll make it through the wilds, thanks.

GRANT

I don't even know your first name.

SANGER

Margaret.

GRANT

Mine is Madison.

He offers his hand, and she shakes it. He leaves.

SANGER

You bastard, Madison Grant. You are not going to win.

SOUND: Fading down of the children's voices.

As the voices fade, light fades to blackout.

In the darkness, an audio clip from Bill O'Reilly after the recent election. (See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5uqy5CBWjKw>)

VOICEOVER

"The demographics are changing. It's not a traditional America anymore.—Hispanic—black—women—The white establishment is now the minority—minority—minority—minority—"

The word reverberates until it dies away.