

## BUSHMAN'S SECRET

Once when I was five, I stayed all night with my grandmother, Nonnie in her one-room apartment at the Parkway Hotel in Chicago.

Darkness came. I heard Lions roaring, loud and frightening, in their cages across the street at the Lincoln Park Zoo.

“They cry for their lost homes and families back in Africa,” Nonnie said. I became sad too, homesick for my bed and toys and my mom and dad at home. Desperate to stop my sobs, Nonnie let me see some of her pictures:

A postcard showing the gorilla, “BUSHMAN,” sitting on a steel bench, encased in plate-glass behind iron bars; an old photo of “Gert” as a child, with her mother, and her six small brothers and sisters peering through the front window of their Cleveland, Ohio Millinery Shop; a beautiful studio photo of Gertrude in her twenties, capturing her intense blue eyes and pretty face in flattering light. There was also a bird’s green feather pinned with a hatpin to her bulletin board above her desk.

Still I cried. Nonnie showed me her closet. There, I saw her “good plaid coats” - one for each season, beautiful light wool, knit dresses in jewel colors, black and navy handmade oxford shoes, and a red leather handbag, and the many hats she made for herself. Nothing helped to calm me.

Nonnie brought out her paper dolls, her drawings and paintings of fine ladies in old-fashioned hats, the children’s books she had written and published, the dolls she had designed in her tiny studio room at the Parkway Hotel.

Finally, Nonnie promised if I’d stop crying, she would tell me “Gorilla Bushman’s Secret”, told to her by his Keeper. I stopped crying and climbed into bed. Nonnie said that because of his great strength, Bushman could escape from his cage at any time. He could break the glass and bend the bars, but having failed to escape in his childhood, he believed he still couldn’t do it. Now he never tried. The Lions sang us to sleep at last.

Diana F. Johnson