

Touching Indians

by Pam Grimes

When I was in kindergarten I wanted to be a hippie. Much to my chagrin, my mother didn't share that viewpoint and habitually dressed me in patent leather shoes, white gloves and pig tails so tight I looked like a Komodo dragon. More Jan Brady, less Janis Joplin.

When I met my husband in college during the early eighties, we both felt we'd missed our decade. At heart we were hippies, not yuppies. We wanted to explore the world, move mountains, touch Indians. Now we have three kids, one dog and a mortgage to support. I suppose the touching Indians thing is out—or is it?

Another birthday rolled around last week and I decided to see if, at forty-something, I could still touch an Indian or two.

Let me make it clear from the start that this was NOT a stellar birthday. It began with a shopping trip. Sounds good on the surface, just don't do it with your size four girlfriend unless your plan is to plummet into a deep depression.

My despair launched into hyper-drive when we both came out of the dressing room wearing the exact same pants. While the designer Capris fit my pal's pixyish frame like a dream, on me they looked like two bags of fighting squirrels.

After an hour of watching my friend agonize over whether or not she could squeeze *down* into a size two, I'd had enough. I left the mall, making a mental note to hit the gym first thing the next morning.

The evening's plan was to attend a baseball game with our kids. Not a bad plan—just not *my* plan. My plan would have involved an elegant evening on the town. But I have three boys; what do I know about elegance? Elegance for me is when my eight-year-old uses a napkin at dinner instead of the back of his hand. It was time to face facts; my family wasn't suited for elegance. We were ballpark people now.

We piled into the hot minivan and cruised to the stadium. The ballpark sign announced that we'd just missed Free Mullet Monday.

Drat!

We'd also missed Thirsty Thursday; better known as every child's chance to watch daddy vomit cheap beer on his shoes. It was Friday; apparently nothing's free on Friday.

Within an hour we'd purchased two miniature baseball bats, one giant foam finger and had scarfed down thirty dollars worth of questionable hot dogs. I was hot, sticky and coated with a fine sheen of mustard and kettle corn bits. It was time to go home, soak in a tub and forget that I was now another year older.

This couldn't really be my birthday, could it?

That's when I realized that I had to do something spontaneous, if for no other reason than to prove that I was *not dead yet!* I made a rash decision and snuck out of the ballpark, found the nearest train stop and called hubby. I told him not to worry; I was going to ride the Light Rail home—a *first!*

I know it's not exactly sky-diving but it was exciting to me nonetheless.

I boarded the very next train that came my way, not really concerned about which direction it was heading. All I cared about was that it was moving away from hot dogs and sweaty balls.

Once on board the train I quickly bonded with the stranger least resembling a serial killer. And Marco the tattooed wonder boy was certainly a stranger. His body was covered in a kaleidoscope of colorful tattoos and his upper lip was so full of metal, it looked as though the jewelry counter at Macy's had exploded on his face.

I'm sure Marco instantly sized me up for the neophyte that I was. But, like a knight in pierced and tattooed armor, he came to my rescue.

Marco spoke to me about the Light Rail system with a hushed reverence usually reserved for religious experiences. I suppose we were in his church—the church of mass transit.

In addition to numerous face piercings, Marco had two enormous earlobes which extended toward his massive shoulders. Each fleshy earlobe had been stretched wide in the center by stainless steel rings the size of mayonnaise lids.

A monolithic Nike poster coated the wall behind Marco, depicting a smiling Tiger Woods superimposed over a \$400 pair of athletic shoes. When Marco turned his head just right, Tiger's face played peek-a-boo with me through Marco's earlobes. A fairly surreal sight, but then I had come looking for the surreal, hadn't I? I wanted to touch Indians and while Marco was more Sicilian than Indian, I figured he counted.

I tried to fit in and play it cool; knowing deep down that Marco was merely placating me. He knew I was a fake, a poser. A typical suburban soccer mom, whose chief mode of transport was a gas guzzling minivan. I reeked of middle class, middle age, middle everything!

When had I lost touch with my youth, with my cool? I figured it was around the time I'd bought my first pair of Odor Eaters or when I started thinking of Donald Rumsfeld as "hunky".

I stole a quick glance around the train taking in the other riders—all of them cool it turns out. All except one guy who stood planted dead center in the car, his loose fleshy forearms crossed over a filth encrusted shirt that read, "Back Off".

The stranger bounced and weaved with the gyrations of the train, never once losing his balance. Evidence of a hard life showed in deep grooves across his withered face. He had one lazy eye; the other eye looked like it was all business.

I wondered if it was Half Price Psycho Night at the ballpark.

Marco explained that the stranger was known as Crazy Bob; King of the Trains. Marco warned me not to look directly into Crazy Bob's eyes as that tended to "set him off".

Sound advice.

By the time we'd arrived at the end of the line I knew the name of the best tattoo parlor in town, where to get the cheapest parts for my Harley (if I ever get one), and the phone number of a guy named Eddy who would teach me to cage fight—*cheap*.

As a parting gift Marco handed me his transfer ticket for the next train. He explained in hushed tones that it was non-transferable, but he wouldn't tell if I wouldn't. We winked, as conspirators will do, and waved goodbye on

the platform.

As he turned to leave, I caught a glimpse of the new moon cresting over the hills through Marco's earlobes—it was a gloriously twisted sight to behold.

Riding the rails with Marco the tattooed wonder boy left me renewed as no shopping trip or spa treatment ever could. I felt alive. I'd taken a chance, done the unexpected, surprised myself. I'd touched Indians...okay, maybe not real Indians, but close enough for me.

Perhaps the next birthday will be the one where I jump out of a plane instead of onto a train. After all, the important thing isn't where you end up; it's making the leap that counts.

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