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## SADIE, MY GRANDMOTHER

by

Michael Vocino

We always called her “Sadie,” but my grandmother’s real name was Eunice Beaton. She died relatively young at sixty-nine, and was “old” long before her time. She suffered constantly from arthritis and because she always walked slowly and she wore only those high, black shoes with really thick heels just like the nuns always wore. Even though I suspect she was always in pain, she had a great sense of humor and when I was a kid, I loved staying with her.

She and my grandfather lived in an apartment above the Animal Rescue League building which at that time occupied the entire space between Stuart and Carver Streets. It was right in the theatre district of downtown Boston and right on the edge of the old “Combat Zone.” It faced Park Square and we always watched the fireworks on Boston Common on July 4<sup>th</sup> from their huge roof garden. We also had the complete run of the League’s entire business when it was not open. In fact, you had to walk through the veterinarian waiting-room to get to the staircase leading up to my grandparents’ apartment.

The apartment was two floors with the living room and kitchen on the first floor and three bedrooms and a bath on the second floor. The kitchen had windows and a door that opened on to the roof deck. If you climbed the wall at the back of the roof deck which was only up to the chin of this young kid, you could climb over onto the roof of the next building further down on Stuart Street. My cousin Maureen and I did that frequently. The building housed a nightclub and it had a retractable roof that was almost always open in the warm weather. During the day, we would lean over and watch the rehearsals for the coming night’s floor show. We had to make sure that the sun was not to our back so that our shadows would not project onto the stage as we watched from the open roof. My Uncle Joe, the oldest of my mother’s two younger brothers and Maureen’s dad, taught us this after some fellow in the club noticed our shadows and yelled at us to get off the roof.

What I didn’t learn until years later is that those beautiful women in their fancy outfits that we loved to watch, particularly at night, were actually men! It seems that that club in the next building on Stuart Street was actually a gay club and the shows were almost always staged with drag queens! We loved to watch, to bring our chairs, especially on warm summer nights and watch the fun happening below.

Sadie’s apartment was also in the theatre district. When I stayed with her, and that was often, I would always go to the movies. The films would run from very early in the morning and not stop until after the last offerings at well after midnight. So, every

morning I would just step out the door and within minutes I could walk to virtually all the major movie houses in Boston at the time. You could also just stay in the theater all day. Once you bought a ticket, you could watch that same film for as many times as pleased you. And I did.

My favorite theater was the Metropolitan. It was built in 1923 and is now on the National Historic Register. It is also the Wang Center for the Performing Arts now. It was on Tremont Street, just around the corner on from my grandmother's apartment. It was known for vaudeville when it opened, and in the 1950s and 60s it was a movie theater and it was one of my playgrounds when I was a boy visiting his grandmother. It was right next to the legitimate stage houses such as the Schubert Theater, and just down the street from RKO/Keith (now the Boston Opera House), and not far from the Paramount Palace and the Essex.

If you turned right when you came out of the League's front door, you would go down Kneeland Street to the Metropolitan, "the Met." If you turned to the left and crossed Kneeland, you would be in Park Square and facing the Boston Common. If I wasn't in the movie palaces of downtown, when visiting, I would be in the Boston Common with its Frog Pond swimming pool for kids or strolling through the Boston Gardens and reading about the city's history on the base of the Common's and Garden's statuary.

It was such a different world then, and my grandmother was so easy going, that I did most of this exploring of Boston totally on my own. I would occasionally accompany Sadie when she went shopping. Whenever she thought she might need help to carry bags, she would ask me to save time during the day to go food shopping with her. We went to a market on Charles Street, across the Commons, as I recall.

I forgot that she had asked me to return to the apartment one day at around noon to help her with bags. I was out before nine, at the Metropolitan and watching an historical epic called "Helen of Troy." It was released in the mid-1950s, and it was a lavish epic that really caught my attention. It starred Jacques Sernas as Prince Paris, the lover of Helen who was played by Rosanna Podesta. I stayed for more than one showing, totally forgetting Sadie and helping her with shopping bags. During the third showing of the film, I heard her voice, loud and angry, coming down the aisle yelling my name, "Michael?" Her eyes hadn't adjusted to the darkened theater, she couldn't see me and she was accompanied by a young usher who was flashing a handheld light down each row of seats and they sought me out. I was so embarrassed. I just slouched in my seat in the hopes they wouldn't see me. They did, and she took me out by the arm. She wasn't really angry, though, and minutes after being on the outside again walking toward the food market, she was talking about her day with her girlfriend, Loretta Sullivan.

Sadie was really easy with her children, not just her grandchildren like me. My mother told stories about how whenever she didn't want to go to school she would just tell Sadie she didn't feel like it. Sadie would just say, "OK." My mother would laugh years later as she told me this story, but she said she wished Sadie had pushed her more, gave her stronger direction when it came to education.

Sadie was just as easy with her two sons. One, Uncle Jack, not much older than me, would stand at the bottom of the stairs in the veterinarians' lobby yelling "Ma, Ma..." Finally Sadie would come to the top of the stairs asking what he wanted. Uncle Jack would ask for money and my grandmother would always say "No." My Uncle Jack told me not to move as we could hear my grandmother moving away from the stairs cursing that "the kid" was always looking for a handout, and cursing "he thinks I'm made of money," etc. All the time she was cursing, she would be fishing in her bag for a dollar bill which she would then throw down the stairs for him.

Uncle Jack would laugh as his mother threw him some money, "See, she always does that, complains, complains, complains, and then throws me down what I need."

My Mom was the person who gave my grandmother the name "Sadie." My Mom and her girlfriend, Kay McDonough, who became my godmother, gave all the family members pet names. Unfortunately for Sadie, hers was the only one to stick. My mom's was "Nellie." My grandfather's was "Elmer." Those are the only other ones that I remember.

Holiday's at Sadie's were particularly fun. I've already mentioned how the Fourth of July was special because of the apartment's proximity to the Boston Common and with it being at the top of the building with a great roof garden, we had virtual front row seats to the fireworks display. There was a huge garage on the Stuart Street side of the League that family and friends used for parking while everyone else in Boston had to search for a place to store their autos.

At Christmas, the Boston Common would be lighted and decorated to the hilt. There was always a great crèche with real reindeer. The entire family, mom, dad, my sister, my cousins Maureen and Kathleen and their dad, my Uncle Joe, as well as Sadie and Gramps would walk over to see the spectacular Christmas decorations.

At Easter, the Commons would have a city-sponsored egg hunt which I remember attending. Easter was always a time for clothes shopping and with the major Boston stores (Filene's, Jordan Marsh, etc.) just footsteps away, my mom and grandmother would take my sister and I on day excursions to buy Easter outfits. Prior to school's beginning in September, we'd also visit Collegiate House to buy our parochial school uniforms. The shopping for uniforms wouldn't be so special, but we always went out for lunch at some Boston restaurant which was special.

Sadie did have a great sense of humor, but she didn't put up with anything that smacked of privilege or special treatment of any kind. She occasionally would take my sister and I shopping for a gift or clothes when we visited. One day, the three of us were walking through Jordan Marsh. There was a photographer there, attempting to lure people into having photos taken. The photographer approached Sadie saying, "Oh, Mam, you've got to let me take a photo of your two beautiful children." She put the fellow down by asking him how beautiful he would think the children are if she didn't have the money to pay for a photograph. After a few other put downs, the photographer finally relented, Sadie smiled, and the three of us walked out without a photographic record of our sojourn in Jordan Marsh. Sadie loved the confrontation but my sister and I left a little embarrassed. She could be a very strong woman.

Sadie was not a Catholic. She and my grandfather were married in St. Mary's Episcopal Church at Upham's Corner in Boston. Though raised Catholic, my Gramps, her husband, never practiced his religion. As a result, my mother and her two brothers were not raised in any faith tradition. When she was about twelve, though, all the other kids in the area were making confirmation. My mother asked Sadie if she could make her confirmation, too.

"Well," said Sadie, "if you are going to be Catholic, we are all going to be Catholic."

My mother and her two brothers made their First Communions after instruction, and my mother made her confirmation on the same day. My mom told us that no one else in her family were Catholic and she could never tell her grandfather that she was Catholic because he hated Catholics so much. He died not knowing that my mother and her brothers were Catholics.

Sadie also tried conversion. She went to visit some monsignor at the Cathedral in Boston. He insisted upon calling my grandmother "Miss Beaton" even though she had been married for years and had three children. After insisting on being called "Mr. Connaughton," and with the monsignor refusing to do so and insisting on calling her "Miss Beaton," Sadie walked out of her conversion attempt and never returned.

After Sadie died, I was going through her wallet, and there tucked into one of the pockets I found an old Sacred Heart scapular that she carried around with her at all times according to my mom. Guess Sadie was never officially deemed "Catholic," but she evidently believed.

When the League sold its downtown property, my grandmother moved to another Boston apartment, but because she was having more and more difficulty taking care of herself, she eventually moved in with us. Eventually, one morning my sister found her dead in bed. She was frozen in a position that indicated she was either getting in or out of the bed at the time.

I think about Sadie a lot. She once told me that she hated being called "Sadie," but it seemed futile to fight it. She told me she would rather have been called "Grammy," as her own mother was.

When away at school, Sadie would send my cards all the time. She always signed them "Grammy." I wish I had called her "Grammy."

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