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The Bull

HE WAS BORN SIDNEY FRUMPKIN on July 11, 1903, one of nine surviving children to Abram and Lubba Frumpkin of Minsk and Kazan, respectively. His parents, both Orthodox Jews, emigrated from Imperial Russia in 1888. After eight years in this country and the birth of his first few children, Abram joined the New York City Police Department, eventually working out of Brooklyn's Seventy-Eighth Precinct. The borough of Brooklyn was completing the transition from a semirural community of farms, shade trees and backyard gardens to a noisy city, becoming further transformed by the new immigrants from eastern and southern Europe. The city had been an independent municipality until just five years before Sidney's birth, when it was incorporated into New York City. The *Brooklyn Eagle*, the paper that would eventually chronicle the rise of its hometown matador, was for a time edited in the late 1840s by Walt Whitman, another homeboy whose private life was also best kept from the public eye.

By the time the Frumpkin's fifth child Sidney arrived, the family was living at 14 Jackson Place in a district known as Park Slope. They were just three blocks west of Prospect Park and five blocks

north of Greenwood Cemetery, the two huge green patches left in the center of Brooklyn.

Most of what is known of Sidney's childhood a century ago comes from two sources, both over half a century old. Each, although covering many of the same events, are quite different: parallel yet only partial narratives in very dissimilar voices, although the source for the mingled (and occasionally mangled) facts and fictions in both is Sidney himself. The first was a profile of Sidney by Lillian Ross that appeared in the *New Yorker* magazine under the title "El Único Matador" in 1949. The young writer traveled with Sidney for a time in Mexico as he toured with an American protégé. She extensively interviewed Sidney's former friend Ernest Hemingway in Ketchum, Idaho, in December 1947 for the article—the first that would appear in the magazine under her own byline. The persona of Sidney that comes through in "El Único Matador" is brash, confident, slangy, eccentric, and boastful—a true American character. He also occasionally appears, if not foolish, at least lacking in self-awareness. After the article appeared, Sidney remarked of Ross: "She sits there like a little mouse, looking so cute, but there's nothing but vitriol in her typewriter."

Decades after meeting Sidney, Miss Ross's memories of him remained vivid, full of detail and anecdote that did not make it into her profile. Her article, despite Sidney's grumbling, kept him in the public eye, perpetuating his rather singular celebrity. Having been befriended by Hemingway and his fourth wife, Mary, while researching the article on Sidney, Lillian Ross would go on to write "How Do You Like It Now, Gentlemen?" a famous piece on the author that appeared in the *New Yorker* in 1950. Many of Hemingway's friends shared Sidney's complaint about Ross: her extensive use of the subject's quotes without sufficient context made Hemingway look foolish. Unlike Sidney, Hemingway re-

mained Ross's friend and defended her and her work for the rest of his life. For her part, Miss Ross returned the favor, remaining a Hemingway stalwart, her fondness and respect for him undiminished. If there are any sides to be taken in the subsequent falling out between Sidney Franklin and Ernest Hemingway, for Ross there is no contest.

The second source of information on Sidney's early life was his autobiography, *Bullfighter from Brooklyn*, which was published by Prentice Hall in 1952. There is no co-writer mentioned, and the assumption is that this is the face that Sidney wanted the public to see. To some this face is more of a mask. The book is generally considered fanciful by many who knew him. Barnaby Conrad, foremost American bullfight authority, aficionado, writer of many bullfighting books, and himself an amateur *torero* who once performed on the same bill with the great Juan Belmonte as "El Niño de California" (loosely "the California Kid"), when asked about *Bullfighter from Brooklyn* said cheerfully, "Of course it's all bullshit." One of Sidney's acquaintances from the 1940s, film director and bullfighter Budd Boetticher, said essentially the same thing, the reference to taurine excrement being the common thread.

An autobiography implies that the reader is getting the subject and author's true voice, but what is missing from *Bullfighter from Brooklyn* is Sidney's actual voice, the streetwise hyperbole and movie tough-guy slang that comes through so clearly in Ross's *New Yorker* piece. In contrast, Sidney personifies himself as a man of thoughtful maturity, a midcentury American sportsman, soldier of fortune, and bon vivant who became a citizen of the world, a friend of presidents and kings. He speaks modestly of the most preposterous accomplishments. He claimed to have single-handedly saved the Spanish bullfight from extinction when in 1930 the dictator Miguel Primo de Rivera, in an attempt to bring

his country into the modern era, tried to ban the *corrida* outright because tourists were horrified by the bulls' gutting of the picadors' horses, an occurrence foreigners found particularly medieval and barbaric. Sidney asserts that it was he alone who arrived at the solution of armoring the horses with thick padding as is done on the breeding ranches for the *tientas*, the testing of young stock. Sidney claims to have obtained a solo audience with Primo de Rivera to pitch this solution, and that his intervention was all that kept bullfighting alive. It is a boast scoffed at by aficionados then and now. Were it true, it was still not enough to save the dictator, who died soon after being given the boot by his compatriots when they established the Spanish Republic.

Sidney likewise casts himself as the hero in many picaresque tales, the most outlandish of which is the one where for nine days he sexually services the entire female population of a Central American Indian village with the approval of the tribe's males. The laying down of these heterosexual markers right out of the most lurid men's true-story pulps stretched credulity even in 1952. That yarn itself takes up half a chapter. His entire boyhood in Park Slope only merits a page and a half. Recollections of friends and family members who knew Sidney as an adult can only partially bridge the gap between these two narratives of Miss Ross and Sidney himself. There remains then much of his early life that will stay hidden. This is exactly as Sidney would have wished.

Sidney was a small child, often sickly, who claimed to have been pronounced dead by the family doctor at age six from "brain fever." He attended PS 10 in Brooklyn but because of his health and small stature was not allowed to play sports—the great grade-school equalizer essential to the assimilation process of the children of immigrants. Sidney's sense of apartness was felt at an early age. "I

didn't fit in," he said simply. He claims this was aggravated by his older sister Bella, a high school teacher who would try out modern educational theories on Sid when he was tiny, an experience that somewhat unsettled the sensitive lad. A further oddity, according to Sid, was his relationship with his older brother Samuel, a doctor, who let his little brother help him dissect cadaver pieces in his lab before dying of TB at only twenty-seven. At every turn Sidney would feel distance from the world that spawned him, even as he relished the uniqueness of his experiences.

Sidney's real problem growing up was his father. Officer Frumpkin was a tyrant and a bully whose normal tone of voice was a bellow. Sidney recalled that his father was a terror for a small boy. Sidney's niece Eve Frumkin (the *P* was dropped somewhere across the decades) said that her grandfather went by the name of "Abe," probably since his police force days. She remembered him late in life, banging his walking stick angrily on the floor to command attention from his family. He was a large, imposing man with a florid complexion and a big moustache. Lillian Ross spoke to some of Sidney's elementary school teachers in 1947, and one recalled Officer Frumpkin haranguing the teachers whenever one of his girls got into trouble. He seems to have had less interest in defending his fifth-born. Sidney claimed that his own father simply did not like him, partly because he inherited Lubba's fair hair and skin. (Eve Frumkin said that her grandfather inflicted emotional damage on his other sons as well. She described one, a successful professional, who later in life lived almost as a recluse, sleeping in a tiny room behind his office and only socializing once a week when he would visit a sister's family for a hot meal and a bath.)

Officer Frumpkin also seemed not to like Sidney's inclination to the arts. By the time the unathletic boy was twelve years old, he had found his first calling, the stage, performing skits with

two girls between the acts at a local theater. His mother was all for it, but the patriarch—correctly, in his mind—sniffed something unmanly in the whole process of singing and dancing for public display. Sidney first adopted the surname “Franklin” as a stage name, supposedly to keep the old man from getting wise to his after-school activity. It didn’t work. Sidney claims the name Franklin was inspired by Benjamin Franklin, founder of his favorite magazine, the *Saturday Evening Post*. (This Anglicization of his father’s old country name to something more all-American was a common enough practice by first generation children at the turn of the last century, especially those who aspired to a public life. Jacob Gershovitz, born in Brooklyn five years before Sidney, became George Gershwin by the time of his earliest tin-pan alley days.) After two years of semiprofessional greasepaint, Sidney gave up the stage, later telling Lillian Ross that the whole business was too “feministic.”

The artistic itch was persistent, however, and Sidney found a new creative outlet in drawing classes, the only course he truly enjoyed in Brooklyn’s Commercial High School. By age seventeen Sidney dropped out of school and with this newly nurtured talent, began his own commercial silk-screen poster business. (His obituary in the *New York Times* stated that he attended art school at Columbia University, but Sidney makes no mention of this either to Lillian Ross or in his own writings.)

Many parents would have been proud of such entrepreneurial initiative, an example of a child’s successful immersion into the new culture, but Officer Frumpkin was again displeased. Sidney’s late brother, Sam, had been the doctor. Two other brothers, Robert and Milton, became accountants. The eldest surviving boy, Henry, became a cop like the old man. All the Frumpkin men had acceptable, if not he-man, careers for first-generation Americans growing

up with the new century — careers that a parent could brag about in the butcher shop, or on the sidewalk with the fruit man, at the front stoop with the nosy neighbor lady, or with the boys down at the station house. All except Sidney. For him excuses had to be made, at least by Abe. Lubba always supported her boy in whatever he would choose to do. She was not the first mama who had to protect a sensitive boy from a brutish pop.

Sidney Franklin was still, in the terms of the day, all boy and all Brooklyn: tough, cocky, quick to get his dander up, quick to crack wise. Brooklyn had never been a place for the timid to grow up; a kid who showed weakness was as doomed as a gazelle limping across the Serengeti. In these old world neighborhoods, an aggressive attitude, a ritual in-your-face posturing, was needed just to survive. To outsiders from more genteel circumstances this pose could seem loud, belligerent, or even obnoxious. It would, however, prove to be good training for the bullfighting world, especially for a young man who was discovering that there was something different about himself that he had best keep under wraps. Still there was nothing swishy or effeminate about Sidney, and he wouldn't dare display such behavior even if he wanted to. As he grew into an adult, his voice modulated into a rich baritone. Lillian Ross said of him in middle age that his vocabulary and manner of speaking made him sound like a fight promoter — or a cop. His words were torrents of cliché, hyperbole, homily, and the well-worn adage.

The Brooklyn street of his youth, typical of the greater New York melting pot, was the world of “disses” and “dats,” “dems” and “dose,” a home to an urban subculture that became an American archetype, spawning a stock character of the streetwise child of immigrants with the defiant New York accent. In popular culture it would become as identifiable a character as the Southern belle, the flinty New Englander, or the Texas cowboy. (If one listens to

the recording of Lou Gehrig's famous farewell speech in Yankee Stadium, instead of Gary Cooper's flat Montana intonation in the film version of the event, it almost sounds as if the Iron Horse is saying that he is the luckiest man "on the face of the oith." Gehrig, the son of German immigrants, was born in lower Manhattan less than a month before Sidney.) To those raised in Brooklyn, the accent had its own subdivisions. For example, locals said it was easy to differentiate the more high-pitched, nasal New Yorkese of the predominantly secular Jewish neighborhood of Flatbush from the lower, more guttural tones of the Italians of Bensonhurst.

This cultural mix bred the individuals who created the archetype. Brooklyn was the birthplace of Al Capone four years before Sidney's own arrival. Another child of immigrants, Capone would also grow up with the new century just a few miles north of Park Slope in the neighborhood of Williamsburg, then move with his parents to Park Slope itself when Sid was just ten. Williamsburg was home to a rich Jewish community both secular and orthodox, which was chronicled by novelist and screenwriter Daniel Fuchs (who presumably did not run with the same crowd as the Capone boy, although he and his pals did treat the drugstore phone booth where Vincent "Mad Dog" Coll was rubbed out as a tourist attraction). Another Jewish intellectual born in Brooklyn just ten months after Sidney was editor, critic, and broadcast personality Clifton Fadiman, who also happened to be Sidney's cousin.

Horse-drawn delivery drays shared the pavement with streetcars, trolleys, and the new arrival, automobiles. The town was the home of Ebbets Field, built when Sidney was just nine for the National League team, which would soon shorten its name from Brooklyn Trolley Dodgers to simply Dodgers. The new ballpark was situated two and a half miles by street from Jackson Place, much closer if a boy cut straight east through Prospect Park. Once

there, Sidney could stand in line to plop down his quarter at the ticket window for a Dodger game with, if not such kids as Al Capone, George Gershwin, or Daniel Fuchs, then perhaps with the sons of some Lithuanian Jews from Brooklyn's Bath Beach, the Horwitz boys—later known as the Howards of the Three Stooges—the youngest of whom, Jerome (“Curly”), was just Sid's age. Three years after Ebbets Field was built, the Dodgers won their first National League pennant since 1900 behind the hitting of a young Casey Stengel. Down Flatbush Avenue about three miles from Ebbets Field loomed the Manhattan Bridge and, to its left, the Brooklyn Bridge. Beyond them rose the great towering iconic shapes of Manhattan itself. Sidney Frumpkin was now a young man earning his own money, beginning to make his way in this amazing city at the beginning of one of New York's own signature eras, the 1920s.

As a financially self-sufficient seventeen-year-old, Sidney was free to explore these enticing streets. He was less free to explore his own feelings and inclinations. There was no acceptable way to be a homosexual in the Brooklyn where Sidney grew up—where conforming to sexual and ethnic expectations was essential to survival—and certainly no way under the roof of Abe Frumpkin. Even Sidney's short stage career was considered incompatible with his father's interpretation of Orthodox Jewry. There would be no coming out, no confessionals at the kitchen table followed by tears and hugs. There were no role models, no support groups, no safe paths. The insular immigrant neighborhoods were as gossipy as small town America; they could be nurturing and supportive until taboos and norms were violated, then they could be scornful, cruel, or violent. Being gay was simply out of the question.

Lillian Ross in her *New Yorker* piece teases the Freudian notion

that Officer Frumpkin would not only have been called “cop” or “flatfoot” by the kids on the street, but in the parlance of the day, “bull” as well, so that what Sidney was doing every time he stepped into the ring was performing a symbolic slaying of the father. After planting this provocative kernel, she then allows Sid to cheerfully debunk the idea. “Once I stepped into a ring, I never even *thought* of my father.” If Dr. Freud had little juice around Jackson Place, Officer Frumpkin still had the upper hand — or fist — in his own house.

The incident that sent Sidney at the age of nineteen into Latin America and the violent ritual of the bulls was itself an act of violence. It was also a ritual performed over and over between many fathers and sons when fear and sexuality are in play. Sidney, now a solid five-feet-eleven, virtually an adult with his own business and bank account, felt free to come and go as he pleased although still living at home. He tested the limits of that freedom in the late spring of 1922 when he spent a weekend at the Jersey shore with a male friend. To Lillian Ross he said he and another young man entertained two chorus girls for a couple of nights, although he was careful to say that nothing sexual happened. In his own story three years later, the chorus girls disappeared from the tale and his companion was his “business partner.”

When he came home that Sunday afternoon, his father was in a rage. Sidney claims the old man’s anger was because he, blaming busy telephone lines, had not called his parents to let them know his whereabouts. If so, the policeman’s response was still extreme. Sitting on his bed, Sidney could hear his father thumping up the narrow stairs from the front parlor, a sound to which he had steeled himself over the years. The door flew open and, without a word, Abe came after his son. Not having a *banderillero* to double the charging animal for him, Sidney did not know whether the bull would hook from one side or the other — whether

to watch for the right hand or the left. Bullfighters refer to the horn an animal prefers as the master horn, a concept Sidney would soon learn. Before he could come up with an explanation or excuse, his father punched him in the face. Sidney claimed he did not regain consciousness until the following day.

It is pointless to speculate whether this act was in response to simply not calling, or whether his father feared what his boy and a male friend could be doing at a hotel in Asbury Park for two nights. Sidney's niece Eve said that over the last eighty-five years family memory had dimmed on the subject of the patriarch's motives, if indeed the incident is discussed at all. Abe's response today would perhaps land him in the lockup of his own Seventy-Eighth Precinct, but in 1922 it was apparently a father's prerogative to knock a son unconscious, especially if he feared the boy was becoming a *faygeleh*. In the Brooklyn of Sidney Franklin's youth, domestic violence was as common as stickball.

The explosion had been building up for years. Sidney was ready to go. He had held himself in check since he was a boy, controlling not only his temper and passions but also his curiosity—curiosity about life, about sex not furtive but unbridled, about the world. He was tired of pretending to be what he could not be: the dutiful son who would one day have the safe career, marry a nice girl who would make the folks proud, and have a family so that no one would talk. Sexuality aside, his grand sense of himself and his destiny was too great for such a conventional life. He was ready for the world and what he imagined it could hold for him in all its darkness and all its glory. He was, after all, almost nineteen and thought in such sweeping nineteen-year-old terms. So he cleaned out his bank account, ordered a trunk from Gimbel's, and booked passage under the name "Sidney Franklin" on the SS *Monterrey* bound for Havana and Veracruz.