

Purple Willi

Berlin Zoo, Breeding Centre.

Hans the zookeeper closed the door on my cage. He has been grumpy today: toothache, he told me. Of course I act dumb, pretending I'm stupid, slow and lazy. It's what everyone expects of a sloth. Hans has pet names for us all. He calls me Sybil, after his mother. My real name is Wilhelm although most of the animals here know me as Big Willi. It's a joke, of course, since I'm a Three-Toed Pygmy Sloth.

If you're one of those nerds who needs to know everything in detail, try this link:

www.iucnredlist.org/details/61925/0

Or if you just wish to look at adorable pictures of me, try this one:

www.arkive.org/pygmy-three-toed-sloth/bradypus-pygmaeus/

Here's one of my favourites.



In case you are too lazy to look me up, I should explain that I'm quite rare, indeed very rare, which is why I'm here in the Berlin Zoo breeding programme.

Now, Hans is not fully trained or he would know I'm male. Perhaps I'm telling tales out of school but Hans is really just a 'feeder and cleaner'. He only got the job because Sybil his Mum works in the office and she fudged the paperwork to say 'Hans has a great track record breeding animals', which might be true if you consider fish to be animals.

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More of this later. Anyway, when he started years ago, Sybil his Mum had high hopes for Hans, which is only natural. However, the authorities soon found out he is dim, very dim. Nowadays they don't let Hans anywhere near the primates, most of which are brighter than Hans. One day Siegfried, one of the baboons, stole Hans's keys and after dark he opened all the cages. I knew better than to roam about among the lions and tigers. By daybreak when the first of the keepers arrived there was carnage. Some of the birds disappeared entirely never to be seen again.

Of course, this is Germany where everything must be *perfektionieren* or more simply put 'perfect': (have you noticed how Germans always make words longer than they need to be?). Anyway, as you've already guessed, the incident was all hushed up, so you will probably not have heard about it. A few snakes got on a train and made it as far as Barcelona before they were caught and returned. A giant centipede got into the underground system and caused havoc until he electrocuted himself by shorting across the live rail. There is still a panther roaming about, last spotted in the Black Forest area, a female. She is wearing a pink ear tag with the number B/P 1989-23F. There is a €20,000 reward for her return alive and healthy - please God! - or €5,000 dead provided you first sign *eine Geheimhaltungsvereinbarung* (a no disclosure agreement).

Oh but I do miss Big Bertha the Panther! She was a really good sort. I spend over five years in the cage next to her while they tried time after time to get her pregnant which, being lesbian, she hated. The night she escaped, she was two months *mit Kindern*, a secret she shared with me alone. They did it to her by IVF while she was tranquilised.

I should explain, they keep me apart from the other pygmy sloths most of the year. To be fair, my harem and their youngsters are nearby, on the other side of the fine mesh screen because they are precious too and it's important for my libido that I can smell them so I know when it is time to perform so that I can psyche myself up for the big night ahead. Most of the youngsters here are my progeny, my sons and daughters but there are others, also produced by IVF. There is even talk of preserving my sperm. Over my dead body!

Anyway, here in the breeding centre, over the years the pen next to me has been used as a mating area for most of the big cats and once, unsuccessfully, as the stud ground for a very randy giraffe called Heinrich. At one sniff of a female in heat his manhood trailed so long and low it almost touched the ground. And the odour, horrible. Watching giraffes mating is like watching a blind pole-vaulter on Mogadon. It takes hours to get a successful launch. Small wonder they don't let the public watch. If you don't believe me, try this and stay awake.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=9jGK-ahxRh8

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While we're in this arena of conversation and without boasting, in sloth circles I am well-known, in Europe at least, even as far away as Russia. I spent two years on secondment in Moscow, my only failure. The Ruskiies said I was getting too old for the job but it was the mating cage they provided I could not get to grips with. Like Heinrich I'm quite a big chap when aroused and those girls were quite frisky. It was a maze of branches, intertwining, creating obstructions, making it impossible for me to catch up with my mating partners. No matter how hard I tried those Russian beauties always managed to evade me. It was the most frustrating twenty-five months of my life. I almost broke into a run when they brought the air transportation cage for me and I saw I was being sent to Paris.

Well, any sloth worth his feed wants to go to Paris and I was up for it, so to speak. Sadly, I must report another disappointment. There was a viral infection endemic in the females' naughty bits and when I caught the itch in my private parts I had to be confined in isolation and treated with high doses of a bright purple paste applied three times a day. It smelled of blackcurrants and tasted delicious. The keeper seemed pleased I was licking it off. I heard him say, in French of course, which I have studied for many years, *Mon dieu, regarde la taille de son pénis* (My God, look, his Willie is huge!).

Indeed, I got quite irritated by the number of nosy visitors he brought to view my treatments. Since they didn't bother to ask Berlin my real name, they call me Frederick which some wag shortened to Dick. Apparently, there are still hundreds of photos out there on the internet showing me off as "The Sloth with the Giant Purple Dick!" which is rather coarse, don't you agree? I was a YouTube hit for a few days with the tag "The Big Purple Dick". I've looked for it but they must have removed it now, so hard luck.

Another slightly disappointing aspect of this episode was that someone out there in Web-Land made a fortune by selling small pots of blackcurrant jam with my image on the lid, claiming it was a paste-on version of Viagra. Still, if my misfortune brought pleasure to others I'm happy for them.

When the itch subsided, they took blood and sperm samples, declared me "fit and fecund" then sent me back here to Berlin. I had been away nearly four years and most of my previous ladies had moved on to populate other zoos and so I was kept busy in the mating cage over the next two years. Exhausting but nice too. You'll have guessed the Berlin Zoo breeding programme is quite big business. In recent months there's been talk of a swop with China. The plan was to send me and Big Bertha the Panther in exchange for a couple of Giant Pandas but the deal is stalled because Big Bertha is still missing.

Perhaps now is the time to confess my obsession with football. While I was in the zoo hospital in Paris there was a large CCTV monitor in the staff room where they could watch us and film us performing. Disgusting, really. I could see through the glazed observation panel and mostly the door was left open. OK, OK I did watch other species matting from time to time but only to distract me from my itch. What was amazing to

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me was how quickly it was over for them (they did not 'do' giraffes in Paris, I never found out why). For us sloths, sex is tantric, lasting at least an hour, sometimes all night for one insemination. Anyway, the night keeper was a football addict and streamed games from his laptop onto the big screen. As a consequence, over those months I too became addicted. I saw most of the big matches during those two seasons. For a while I thought Ronaldo the best but when he moved from Man U to Real Madrid I started to follow FC Barcelona, mesmerised by Messi and his footwork. Since they sent me back here to Berlin, watching football has been a real miss. It's just not the same on a tiny wee smartphone screen.

OK, OK! Where did I get a smartphone?

Truth to tell, I'm in a bit of a quandary. It started when Hans began to lose his marbles. Every other day now he leaves his smartphone in my cage when he comes to clean and feed me. He always leaves it in the same spot, on the shelf opposite my feed bin. Although most experts think otherwise, sloths have fairly good eyesight and I spotted it at once. The first time he left it I waited all day and then through the next, tempted but leaving it alone, expecting him to return to collect it. However, it was his weekend off. The relief guy was in and out without a word to me and he missed the phone completely.

When I made my move and borrowed it, I had to experiment for ages to get the hang of it but with my long, pointed fingernails I was soon surfing the net, mainly YouTube, watching clips from football games, sometimes whole matches. To be honest, most of the time the recording quality is quite poor, with quite a lot of background chatter and swearing; disgusting and irritating in equal measure so I usually turn off the sound and run my own commentary in my head.

Anyway, by sheer chance I stumbled on a raft of John Wayne movies, not just the cowboys, the other ones too. But yes . . . my favourite is True Grit which I've watched maybe fifty times over. Somewhat pathetically, I've memorised the whole script, mimicking all the parts. From time to time I do the whole thing for my new harem, acting everything out, through the mesh. Some of our younger kids actually think I am John Wayne! Hilarious.

You see most people think sloths are dull and can't talk but actually we've mastered the art of communicating using brainwaves. It's like a version of Bluetooth and works well up to about 20 metres, sloth to sloth. It worked even better with Big Bertha the Panther after she got the hang of it. Sometimes we would chat for hours, sharing gossip about the other animals, even when she was back in her usual den and display area on the far side of the zoo, nearly 300 metres away.

Before Hans went doolally, I tried to communicate with him but to no avail. Sad to say he was fixated on his pet goldfish. In case you are unaware, 99.999% of fish are

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very, very dim. Indeed, in my opinion it is the long hours Hans spends breeding his goldfish which has rotted his brain. To be fair to Hans and Sybil, they do quite well out of it, selling over the internet and he always has the best available smartphone with unlimited 4G data.

Since Big Bertha the Panther went off on her travels I've found a new friend, a Koala Bear called Kevin. Like me, Kevin enjoys life in the slow lane but when he gets 'talking' using our form of Bluetooth he can be a real hoot. He claims to have met all sorts of people. Because his compound is nearly a hundred metres from my cage I've only seen him once, when I was being wheeled passed on my way to catch the plane to Moscow.

Not to be outdone by my adventures, Kevin claims he is often sent out with one of his keepers to appear on children's TV programmes and occasionally in films like Crocodile Dundee. He claims he has met Angela Merkle three times and Bill Clinton twice. I'm not entirely sure I believe him but he does tell a good story and seems to have his finger on the pulse of everything which happens in our zoo and beyond. He says he is nearly thirty-five years old, way past his breeding years. He says he is pleased to be retired because breeding twice a year is exhausting for a Koala, it seems. Lazy old sod. I expected to perform at least four times a year, often even with females I don't actually fancy.

Oops, the battery warning light is flashing, so I'll have to sign off on my blog for now as the power is almost gone on Hans's phone.

But do keep tuned to:

www.thepurplewilli.dk.com

Oh, and if you see Big Bertha the Panther, tell her I wish she would come back. I really miss her.