Zoo

Alicia Cotsoradis

*DePauw University*

---

**Follow this and additional works at:** [https://scholarship.depauw.edu/studentresearch](https://scholarship.depauw.edu/studentresearch)

**Part of the** [Fiction Commons](https://scholarship.depauw.edu/studentresearch)

**Recommended Citation**

Cotsoradis, Alicia, "Zoo" (2018). *Student research*. 82.

[https://scholarship.depauw.edu/studentresearch/82](https://scholarship.depauw.edu/studentresearch/82)
# Table of Contents

- The Beginning ............................................ 3
- Sister ....................................................... 12
- School ....................................................... 20
- Crime ......................................................... 22
- First Stint in Prison ....................................... 29
- Prison Take Two ........................................... 32
- Zoo ............................................................ 38
- Admissions .................................................. 40
- Black, and Brown, and Polar Beasts, Oh My .... 47
- Parrots ......................................................... 53
- Intake .......................................................... 60
- The Jumbo Beasts .......................................... 67
- Picture Day .................................................... 74
- The Aftermath ............................................... 81
- The Petting Zoo ............................................. 86
- Worker Beasts ............................................... 93
- Big Game Hunting Safari ................................. 103
- The Grand Escape ......................................... 114
- On the News ............................................... 120
- The End ....................................................... 120
- Goodbye ...................................................... 130
The Beginning

My name is Ray, but my name won’t matter once you see my face. You see, I’m scary. I’m the monster that hides in your kid’s closet at night, just waiting to pop out and yell *boo.* I’m danger, and not the sexy kind. You know, the devilish looking man who rides up on a motorcycle only to whisk you off your feet, then leaves you choking on your own breath. No, I’m not him. And I’m not the adventurous type of dangerous either. You know, the man who has climbed Everest and fallen from the sky and swam with sharks, and damn, he’s hot.

Or rather, he is sexy and intriguing because of his manly spontaneity and unpredictable tendencies. Well, I’m spontaneous and unpredictable, and yet no one calls me sexy. Unless of course you count the two baby mama’s I knocked up a few years ago. But they were sluts, so they don’t count.

They weren’t the nice goody-two-shoes who fall for the Uncle Jesse type of bad boy, or the basic-turned-sporty girls you’ll find on a study abroad semester in New Zealand or Australia who fall for the backpacker with the cute accent and a heart for adventure.

I’ve taken my chances and I’ve had my fair share of crazy-ass stories you would never believe, and yet no one has ever looked at me with endearing eyes and exclaimed, “Wow, Ray, you’re so spontaneous and unpredictable, and it makes my heart race a million beats per minute!” Nope, that’s not my life, never has been and never will be.

You wanna know what I hear? Or rather, what I glean from the side cast eyes and narrowing stares as people watch me from across the room, far enough away to ensure their safety, but close enough to see the intricacies of my face and create a narrative of my life in their feeble minds. I assume they are thinking, *what a disgusting excuse for a man. His parents must*
be so proud. He’s an animal. He is scum. This is what’s wrong with our society. And, why would he do that to his face?

You know what I think to everyone of you who walks around with a stick up your ass and an attitude of superiority spoonfed to you by the elitist hierarchy of this god damn society? I think, fuck you, and fuck your beliefs that in order to be good you must conform to the strict guidelines of this world that are only attainable by a select few.

Sorry I’m not prettier. Sorry I wasn’t born with a chiseled jaw and bulging muscles, or a big brain to carry me into success. And, sorry when I popped out of my mom’s vagina, all groggy and slimy, the doctor handed me a two-seven offsuit. Have you ever successfully played a round of poker with that hand and won? Oh wait, you don’t have experience with that? That’s right, because when you popped out, the doctor handed you a royal flush, and you’ve been riding that hand your whole life.

That’s what I think, but I rarely say much. They wouldn’t get it anyway. I don’t belong in this mainstream world. The underworld is much better for me; it’s darker and filled with the anomalies of the human race that get turned away up here. But even down there, I don’t really belong. They don’t like smart, and I’m smart.

But, enough of that. I bet you’re wondering what’s wrong with my face. Am I right? You haven’t seen me since we were kids. And if you saw me now you would probably stare.

Every voyeuristic soul- sucking asshole I’ve met in life just wants a show. But I don’t give them one, because if I did, I’d have to let them in to my life. And they don’t deserve that privilege. But you, sissy, deserve that and way more.
This video is my apology and my chance to help you understand. You don’t have to watch, but it’s here if you want to.
The Beginning

We can start when I was a kid, but understand that a lot has changed since then. I’ve aged a lot in the decades that have passed since my birth, and my body is not the cute smooth specimen it once was.

My once bare face is now decorated with blood and sweat mixed with large amounts of Indian ink. I am rougher, and each experience in my life has formed a corresponding crevice on my skin. The leathery feel of my face and the calloused nature of my hands are proof that I’m alive, and my tats tell my story.

Okay, so I might not be sexy now, but I was damn cute back then. At least until the doctors started cutting open my life and inserting these tubes and devices into my tiny body. I don’t remember it, obviously, but I can paint you a decent image from the home videos our Momma forced me to watch later in life. This was before hospitals outlawed videotaping births, which thank god they did because I’m not sure I can ever forget the image of myself sliding down the slip-in-slide birth canal of our own Momma.

She was excited. I was her first baby. Grandmomma was holding the video camera and her hands shook slightly. I’m not sure if she was nervous, or scared, or just old. But, she focused on Momma’s sweaty face, smiling in between contractions, at least at first. Her smiling face however, was an illusion meant to distract from her sad eyes she was so desperately trying to hide.

Her eyes darted around the room looking past grandmomma for someone else, someone she knew wasn’t there and wasn’t coming. She wanted to feel his strong arms around her body, his sultry breath in her face, and his deep voice in her expectant ears. She wanted him to burst
through the doors of the hospital room and, with a teddy bear and flowers in his arms, announce his excitement at becoming a father. She imagined her two men playing ball in the front yard and coming inside beaming with smiles as they sat down at the family table ready to enjoy the food she had been cooking all day for them; it would be a roast. Oh, and she would make a pie from scratch, for dessert. She has never baked before, but she could learn. She would do this right. It wouldn’t be like her childhood.

Ha. You wanna know what she got instead? An empty hospital room and three years of minimal child support until the checks stopped coming and the man who she once loved was no longer reachable. So, her eyes drooped slightly that day in the hospital room, her hope having reached a maximum high only to be shot down violently. Oh, and she got a defective baby. Betcha’ she wished she could stuff me back up her canal and try again.

Remember how I told you what a shitty hand I was dealt? Well it literally started at the moment of my birth. After nine months spent in a crowded stomach, I had approximately forty-five seconds of peace and happiness before the doctors realized something was wrong.

I couldn’t breathe. I was blue. Oh, and my mouth was weirdly deformed. Honestly, they should have let me die right then and there. It would have made my life and the lives of those around me so much easier. But those goddamn bastards saved my life. I’ll never forgive them for that.

When I was born, a lot was wrong. I had a cleft palate, which was the least of my worries at the time, because I also became septic real fast. We later learned I was septic because of group B Strep, something a baby gets from their mom at the time of birth. I’m not blaming Momma; she couldn’t afford prenatal care. I get it.
The ECMO fixed this one defect, but left a scar on my neck right where my carotid is. It was a nice compliment to the scar that would eventually replace my cleft palate on my upper lip.

The doctors also heard a murmur in my heart, and turns out I had a small hole in it that. See, I wasn’t ever fully whole.

The doctors didn’t even tell Momma what was happening. They took me away and I later watched in the home video as her eyes went from sad to utterly broken. I was a positive new beginning for her. Having been addicted to opioids and heroin before getting knocked up, she got sober, for me. My dad still used on the day I was born, but he was functional, and he had a job.

He represented a future for Momma, but would he stay if she made a shit baby? Well, he didn’t stay but I don’t think that had anything to do with my health status at birth. He didn’t want this fantasy life she wanted. He was content living in the underworld of druggies and crime. But, she wanted more, for herself and her new son.

Grandmomma was the only person Momma had. The camera stopped rolling. I’m assuming Grandmomma stopped videotaping to reassure Momma that this was all probably nothing, and the nice doctors would bring back her healthy son soon, but that was a lie.

When the doctors came back, they told Momma I needed a double bypass heart surgery, as a newborn. All she could ask was, “How much will that cost?”

Momma didn’t have a job at the time, and of course she would get me the surgery, but at what price?

I ended up being fine, except for three small scars, one on my chest and two on my face. The facial scars would have larger implications in my life down the road, but none of us knew that then. So, we went on with our life as any normal family would.
This was all before you, sissy.

I don’t remember much of the next few years, but from the pictures I saw, I seemed happy enough. I was too young to realize how poor we were and how shitty our neighborhood truly was. A lot of kids didn’t get dinner; it made you stronger. And, the bad men outside were always just “playing games” as Momma would say. Sometimes, I miss this innocence.

“Snow” still meant the cold weather fluff that got me out of school.

“Weed” was what Momma always had me pull from the flower beds in the front, not that it mattered since the flowers were dead most the time and the building itself was in full decay. But, hey- at least the weeds were gone.

And “Molly?” She was this cute girl in my first grade class. I still remember her soft skin and how her momma used to kiss her before school every day. She left our school in third grade. Her momma married rich and got her out of there. Good for her.

It might surprise you to know that my luck turned around, just like Molly’s. Well, at least for a little while. Momma found this man. The man that would eventually become your dad.

Moma told me the story of the first time I met this man. I wasn’t an affectionate kid, but for some reason when I was first introduced to him at the age of three, I ran to him and I wrapped my arms around his leg; it was so sturdy. He was so strong. I wouldn’t let go, and he didn’t try to make me let go. I looked at him and in that moment I had a dad.

He was older and smart: which meant he was rich. He had horses. He literally owned horses like they do on TV. It was amazing.
I’ve always loved animals. Sometimes, I feel like they’re the only ones who understand me. I get really anxious in day-to-day life, but put a dog in front of me and I suddenly feel a wave of calm rush over my body. I wonder if people feel this calm all the time?

This man Momma eventually married actually let me ride the horses. I rode my first one when I was four. I was so scared, but he lifted me up onto this little horse, and he held onto me. The study man never let go.

I wasn’t scared the next time.

Sometimes momma would come with us to take care of the horses, but sometimes she would stay back at home and get dinner ready. I liked those days best. It was just me and him: my almost-dad. He would help me ride, and after I would watch as he rode with such grace on the big kid horses. Then, we would stop at this gas station on our way back and he would hand me a dollar, and he would let me buy whatever I wanted. Life was pretty good there for a bit, and I felt like a King. Nothing could pull me from my throne.

Ha, that is until Momma got pregnant again. With you.

She ruined everything. I was going to be this man’s son. We loved each other. I loved him at least. I could have made him love me like his own.

I know I used to get mad sometimes as a kid, and I know I used to say stuff and do stuff I shouldn’t have done, but I was trying. And, I was getting better. The more time I spent with him and the more time I spent with the horses, the less angry I felt. The anxiety I had once had that shook me to the core, had subsided in these past years. I liked being happy.

But, happiness is fleeting. I remember the day Momma told me she and this man who I had begged to call Dad, were having a little girl.
I was five years old and I can still feel the pit in my stomach that emptied out, never to be filled again. They both looked so happy, but how could they be happy when my whole world was about to be ripped from me? I cried that day and my almost-dad told me that boys don’t cry, and that he would love me just the same as this little girl. I didn’t believe him.

He had become the center of my world. A powerful, yet kind man who raised our family from dirt and placed us in a secure home and loving environment. Momma has been sober for a whole year, mainly because this man was straight as an arrow. He also paid for my surgeries, something Momma could have never done. But what had I given him that would entice him to love me as much as a shining little girl who looked just like him and shared the same blood?

I had given him uncontrollable crying fits when I felt a wave of anxiety devour my body but didn’t know how to handle it. I had given him fists when red fire filled my belly and I hated him and this world. And I had given him impatience because my mind could not focus on one task at a time.

I was convinced this girl would be better than me. Momma assured me she wouldn’t, but I wasn’t convinced.
Sister

The she-devil was born a bright shiny package of happiness and privilege. I watched as my parents cooed and cawed over you all the while beginning to forget the child that lurked in the background. My anxiety grew tenfold that day.

However, I still thought I could make Him love me. I tried making Him dinner one day, a peanut butter and jelly sandwich on white bread: my favorite. He took a big bite and I felt our connection just like before.

I left the room smiling, only to have that smile ripped from me when I saw the sandwich hidden under a pile of junk mail in the trash later that day.

When I felt him slipping from my grasps, I would sit in my room and shake with a mixture of anger and fear that one day my whole world might be ripped from me. It’s funny in hindsight though, because this anger and fear is what drove me to rip apart my own life with my bare hands.

For His little girl’s first birthday, my almost-dad bought you cowgirl boots and a stuffed pony twice your size. He promised you that day, you would become the best rider in the city. That’s what he told me that when I first started riding. I tried snuffing you out that night.

I snuck into your crib and held a horsie decorated pillow to your face, but you cried and I got scared. I ran back to my room and thrashed my fists into my legs until I had exhausted myself and my rage. I liked the bruises that formed.

My mind raced constantly for the next year. I lived in a constant state of fear that at any moment this world might be taken from me.
When you were two years old, the whole family took a trip out to the farm to visit the horses. I hated that you were on my farm, but I thought if I was nice to you, the sturdy man would want to be my dad forever. So I showed you Snickers, the first pony I ever rode.

We went up to Snickers and I held you up so you could pet his soft fur, but Snickers got spooked and started bucking around. I couldn’t support your weight and stay upright, and we both went crashing to the ground.

“Ray! Is she okay?” My almost-dad yelled to me.

“What the hell is wrong with your son?” He yelled to my mom.

Your son. Thanks Dad.

So, long story short, our parents decided to divorce. They were fighting a lot, I guess. But I think your dad realized he could do better.

He was taking you with him, you were two years old and didn’t know what was going on. I didn’t know what would happen to me, so when your dad told me the news I freaked out. I locked myself in my room and wracked my brain for possible ways to fix this, but I came up short each time.

My nails dug into my legs as I sat in the corner of my room and looked out at the toys and clothes and gifts this man had provided for me. I took the glass picture frame that held a picture of Momma, me, and Him on our first Christmas and I smashed it into the wall as hard as I could. The glass shattered and I sliced my hand pretty badly, but the rush of the warm blood flowing from my body made me smile.

I realized, I am the only one who should ever hurt myself.
So I left my room and I punched this once sturdy man and I kicked him with all my strength. I tried to hurt him as bad as I knew he was gunna hurt me. I thought about the worst things I could say to a man like him, and so, I screamed at him for leaving my Momma and told him I’d tell people he had hit me if he left. That’ll teach him. He wouldn’t dare leave, now.

Why did I do that?

Did I think that would make him stay?

Because it didn’t.

He was gunna take me as his own son. He had tried adopting me. He tried, the paperwork just got screwed up. And he would have tried again. And I told him I’d tell the world he hit me. He never laid a hand on me, but I was scared, and sometimes if you destroy something before it destroys you, it hurts less. He couldn’t hurt me this way. I was safe this way.

So, my almost dad chose in that moment to protect himself and his daughter, who if anyone heard the allegations of him hitting a child, would be taken away from him in a second. Hitting kids wasn’t okay in the upper-class world.

He took you and left, and in the end you got everything I always wanted.

It’s funny to me how we make choices when we’re infants, or toddlers, or children, that completely define the trajectory of our future lives. We make these decisions without forethought and often without immediate regret because our actions don’t tend to cause a storm right away.

They create the wind, the rain, and the right conditions that produce this massive shit storm later in life. So much later sometimes we forget what caused the storm: what was truly at its root. But, the truth is, it isn’t one decision that ends up ruining a life. It’s the accumulation of every bad decision that was ever made by us and for us.
What seven-year-old understands how one phrase can isolate the only man in his world who could pull his ass out of this shit hole we call life. How was a seven-year-old supposed to understand that his accusation could cause this man to lose his job, his respect, his freedom, and most importantly, that little girl he loves so much.

I didn’t know. If I did, I think it’s safe to say I would not have said what I said.

So I watched as these two people walked out of my life and left me and my Momma with nothing. It’s not like Momma had a job or income, or really anything to support our family. I think losing this guy who could’ve been my dad is what made me cling onto the idea of my biological dad still maybe being out there and wanting to love me.

I begged Momma for my biological dad’s number every day after the divorce. But she said, “No. He wasn’t worth the effort.”

Well I’d be damned if I didn’t get to talk to my dad. So I waited until Momma went to bed one night and I snuck into her room and into her purse. She had mentioned his name once before, so I knew I was looking for a Mike, but that’s all I had to go off of.

I found her address book tucked neatly into her purse next to a carton of cigs and a bible, and I flipped anxiously through it. Bingo. I found three Mikes. I wrote their numbers down and put everything back as perfectly as I could without waking the Beast.

I held this piece of paper in my hands for almost thirty minutes while I sat on my bed. I just looked at it, unable to move. Then without thinking, I dialed the first number. There was just a flat tone. The number was no longer in use.

Two more to go.
I knew it was late, but I dialed the second number and held my breath as it rang. It rang six times, and on the sixth ring a groggy man answered the phone.

“Hello?” He said. “Is everyone alright?”

“Hi, um sir” I trailed off unsure what to say, he sounded really old.

“Do you know what time it is son? It’s 2:30 in the morning. What is going on?”

“How old are you sir? Please, it’s important.” I begged, hoping he wouldn’t hang up.

“Put your mother on the phone, kid. Damn prank calls.”

“Please.” I said.

“I’m seventy-two, and a half.” He snorted.

I hung up. He’s too old. I looked at the last number and drew in a deep breath before dialing. I waited eagerly for the phone to ring in my ears. My mind raced. Momma had mentioned once that Mike was living in Florida with a young blonde beach chick. He was living his best life. I wanted to live it with him. But, my hopes turned sour as the ringing ended and his voicemail exclaimed, “Leave a message, assholes.” I didn’t say anything.

That was definitely him though. I knew it.

When tomorrow came, I called the number again. I got the voicemail again, but this time I left a message: “Hi, my name is Ray and I am seven years old. You’re my dad, I just wanna talk.” I knew for sure he would call back.

I camped out by the phone all day and waited. It rang twice and I felt my heart literally leap from my chest in excitement only to answer the sales pitch of a telemarketer. “We don’t want your shit.” I’d reply then hang up.
I waited until Momma told me I had to go to bed. I sobbed that night into my pillow from the GoodWill store, and I felt a shift happen within me. Each time I waited for the promised call, or promised post card, or promised whatever other bullshit, I grew a little harder. At first, maybe it was a finger that hardened, then eventually, my whole hand. But after eighteen years of hopes and dreams torn down, I was a stone cold rock.

After a whole year of calling Mike every week, he finally answered. He told me, “Look kid, I’m sorry, but you’re not my boy.”

I remember telling him that I was his boy, and I just wanted to talk to my dad.

He told me my mom was a slut and was banging multiple men eight years ago, so he can’t afford to keep taking in strays.

That hurt.

Momma began her men escapades around this time. You were safe at home with your dad, but I wasn’t safe from anything.

There was Ben who liked to touch me.

And, Dave who drank all day.

Manny would cuss me out for no reason.

And, Eric was just fat. He ate all our food, and we didn’t have much to begin with.

I think I was a lot to handle for Momma. She needed someone to love her and help her, because she was all alone. But momma, I needed someone too.

Momma never found the man she fit perfectly with though. I think it was part her, not understanding her worth and being too willing to settle with dumb ass men who would eventually fuck her over for someone better, but I think it was also in part my fault.
I never wanted a man to take away my Momma. As much as I hated her sometimes, she was all I had. So I ruined every relationship Momma had, or tried my damn hardest.

What man wanted to care for an eight year old defective kid anyway. I was helping them. If they were going to eventually leave, might as well expedite the process, right?

I used to pray every night that your dad would marry Momma again, but nothing changed. I dreamt about a life where I wasn’t jealous of you: where we were equals. But, waking up always brought the same disappointment that came from finishing a good book. Reality can’t compare to dreams.

When I needed space to clear my head, I would walk to the neighborhood park. There was this big tree right in the middle where I would sit and just let my mind go blank. I made sure to keep my eyes open though.

Lots of kids went missing from that park, and you never wanna be there during peak transaction times. A drug deal gone wrong could mean shootings, violence, or worse, police involvement. But, it was still nice.

I know Momma loved me, but she started using again around this time. She started getting more spacey and more violent, and I haven’t heard “I love you” since that day. I bet your dad told you he loved you every day, sissy.

I don’t blame her for using, I really don’t. I just wish when she went on her trips she could’ve taken me with her. I always felt so alone and damn forgotten.

She would lock me in the house and leave for hours, and I just couldn’t figure out why she kept me around. She barely even liked me.

She loved you. She use to always tell me that.
She said you were just easier.

Sometimes, if I didn’t give Momma money, she would hit me. I used to steal from the church offering baskets just to get her love. I didn’t mind the beatings, I was tough. What I did mind was never knowing if I’d ever get a hug again from my own Momma again.

Sometimes I blame my parents for giving me shit genes. If only I was smarter or better. I could’ve made something for myself. Life isn’t fair. That much I know. Everyone in my circle was robbed of their childhood. Doesn’t make us special.

That loud silence you hear when you're completely submerged, that’s what it sounded like when my mind went blank as a kid and I stared out a window in my trance-like state: when the sun shined outside, but the darkness that swelled in my body was too dense to fight through.

I was ten when I first pictured death. That pressure in my chest and the rushing of life past me made me feel suffocated, and I thought of how peaceful it would be to just hold a pillow to my face: finally numb to the world’s cruelties. I didn’t think about death again until years later when I sat alone in solitary.

That loud silence is at the heart of solitary. Imagine that pressure on your chest from the surrounding water and the pulse of sound for twenty-four hours straight, seven days a week. For two years straight I prayed daily that I could just reemerge, or sink. It was the middle ground of only barely being alive that hurt the most.
School

I remember when I was in fifth grade, I still liked school, until the bullying started. I started middle school this year and I was proud of my marks up until this point. My teachers told me I was smart, but I’d always come back with a snarky remark so my friends didn’t think I was too soft.

You can’t be too soft when you grow up where I did. And you can’t like school. But I did, until a seventh grader called me Defect, and it just stuck. He was referring to the scars on my neck and upper lip from when I was a baby. He and others would joke that I was broken and that people should stay back because my scars might bust open and my guts would fall out. If they paid attention in science class, they’d know that was shit logic.

Everyone turned that year. I was more alone than ever and suddenly focusing in school was hard, and it took crazy amounts of effort to not let loose the rage that filled me. I lost the battle against the rage, and it was this year I learned how to fight. But guess what, no one ever bullied me again. I smashed lil’ Jimmy’s face so hard on the concrete playground that I was no longer the only defective one.

I got a month long suspension for that one. A whole month without school, most would think this was a vacation, but it was torture. Momma couldn’t afford much food so I was so hungry this month. It’s when I really got into stealing, not only money, but food and clothes and whatever else I could get my hands on.

When I got back to school, everything had changed. Suddenly people feared me, and I liked it. For once, I felt a sense of power and control over my life. It was at the end of sixth grade, after four suspensions and multiple beatings which sent kids to the hospital that I was
invited into gang life. I don’t want you to have to hear about that, you shouldn’t have to hear about that. Your life was always good, and so were you. The details weren’t important anyway, but just know these men were the most genuine family I ever had.

In seventh grade I wanted a boy to die. I have never felt such raw anger and I couldn’t stop myself once I started beating him. My eyes zoned in and my mind blacked out.

I regret that day. It was just another decision that sent my world spiraling. He kissed the first girl I had ever kissed, Jamie. She was soft and sweet and made me want to be good, but when I saw that slut kissing another boy behind the bleachers, something flipped inside of me. I told Momma before that I needed help, but she said I was fine.

When I was smashing this boy’s head in time after time wishing his death, I knew I wasn’t fine. I wanted help. Why did no one give it to me. I didn’t wanna to be a Beast.

He lived, but I was expelled and my spiral started. Without school as my safe haven, and with no help for my anxiety and anger, I ventured deeper into gang life, alcohol, and drugs.
Crime

I spent most of my childhood envious, angry, and unhappy. I wanted so badly to break into the dome of happiness that you, my perfect sister and your perfect father had. I wanted so badly to live the life of celebrities on TV, or truly be anyone but myself. I found a way to do that when I was thirteen.

People think addicts are low life scum, but for those of you who have never been addicted, you don’t know shit and you have no right to talk about me or anyone else.

It’s physical.

It’s mental.

It’s emotional.

It takes over your life.

I started drinking when I was thirteen. Momma let me have some of her wine and I liked the power it gave me. I felt like an adult. Yeah, it tasted like dog shit, but the more you drank the less you tasted.

I always thought adults lived this fairytale life. You know, like once I was a grown up I would stop hurting. I used to see Momma drink this stuff and when she did, she’d always laugh her ass off with her friends from the block. I wanted to laugh. I wanted to smile.

Momma would never let me have a lot of her drink, but around 8pm she’d be sloshed enough that she wouldn’t notice if a few drinks went missing. So, my third time drinking, I got drunk, and that’s when I fell in love with this crimson liquid.
I felt like nothing mattered. Like the anxiety that lived within my body was on mute for just a night. My heart didn’t race as fast and for the first time in a long time, I was happy. I threw up that night, but that didn’t deter me.

Momma had kinda gone off the deep end after your dad left us, so I’d grown pretty used to the aftermath of booze. I’m skilled at holding a puking woman's hair, and I know that a handful of saltines, glass of water, and two advil are key elements to any night spent drinking. She was always pulled together when you visited.

The next morning is not what I had expected though. I felt this soul crushing depression harsher than any sadness I’d felt before. It was if all my dark thoughts were amplified and projected through my mind on replay. I sat against the wall of my bedroom and stared out the window emotionless.

I watched as life raced on without me, and I realized my insignificance. I shook and I felt my heart struggle to beat as if it was pushing through sludge with each movement. I hated this feeling. I wanted it out of my body. So, I snuck another beer, and I felt the anxiety subside and the pressure building up in my skull release.

This is how it started, but it was so far from the end, it’s honestly funny. I moved on to smoking pot, then coke, then heroin, and cough syrup and whatever else I could get my hands on. Momma couldn’t say shit. I saw her smoke pot all the time. I bet she did lines when I went to bed.

It’s weird, but the more she yelled at me for my behavior, the more I wanted to rebel. I fed off her disapproval. I wanted her to hurt. I wanted to get back at her for ruining it with the man who could’ve been my dad.
You never drank, sissy.

I hope you never do. Our family can’t just drink casually.

I guess I always felt like my world was this dark place.

I dropped out of highschool when I was sixteen. I was too drunk or high to pay attention in class. I had been expelled for fighting more times than I could remember, and I couldn’t even enjoy it anymore because I had an image to maintain. There was no point.

Momma kicked me outta the house when she found out I wasn’t finishing school. I still remember the last thing she said to me before shutting the door so I couldn’t see her cry.

She said, “I really wanted you to be better than me.”

I think I hurt my momma more on that day than any other. I was supposed to protect her. I was the man.

I moved in with my girl at the time. We shared her room in her tiny ass apartment. Not that I had room to complain. Momma’s place wasn’t a palace either. It was small, and falling apart, and the front window had been replaced three times in the past year from drive by shooters, so yeah, this was fine.

When my girl got pregnant, her daddy kicked us both out. He called me a low life scum bag. He said he didn’t want our gross baby in his house.

I was a father now. I needed money.

I started selling the day me and my girl were kicked out. My brothers hooked me up with some good clients and got me started. I made a lot that first month. I was hooked. I was living like a king: back on my throne.
I moved in with a buddy of mine and we had this whole operation going from his basement. We called it the Underworld.

I stopped seeing my first baby mama when she got knocked up by some other man. Said she was raped, she might've been, but I didn’t trust her after that. I started seeing someone else. I was still living high off my drug money, so the girls came easy to me.

In a dark world, you have to be your own light. Remember that Sissy because one day your world may not be as bright as it is now.

I knocked up my second baby mama when I was seventeen.

My women weren’t strong.

They didn’t know their worth.

They could’ve done better than me.

I only knew my kid for three months before I was arrested for dealing. Three months wasn’t long enough.

I never loved my baby mamas, but I loved those kids. I gave Opal up for adoption, I was too young and still using.

But Trent, he coulda been mine.

I was ready to be a dad to him.

I wanted to make up for my shitty dad.

Then I got fucking locked up.

I didn’t have enough time.

He was too young to explain everything to.

He’s gunna think I just abandoned him.
God, everything I do in here, I do for my kids.

Opal. I will see your sweet smile and beautiful curly hair one day soon.

And Trent. I will hear your soft voice that now probably sounds like a man. And, I will explain myself to both of you. I never wanted to abandon you, I just, I just couldn’t.

I got caught selling pills when I was seventeen. There was an assortment. Fifteen pills to an undercover cop and six two-ounce baggies of weed in the trunk of my car. It was for a buddy of mine. I was doing him a favor.

Thank God I was still seventeen at the time.

I thought being a minor would make things better.

Shit, I wish I never would’ve gotten caught.

I hurt my momma real bad with this. She didn’t want nothing to do with me, but mommas always come back; they have to. Even when you do everything you can to hurt them. They’re the real saints.

My first cellmate taught me a trick. Whenever I became angry, he would tell me to run, or lift, or to hold a pushup position until my body shook and I had no energy left to be mad.

Sissy, I hated you. But everyday I was on the outside, you called me. You always left a message, and I did listen. Everyday during my arrest and trial you told me you prayed for me. I don’t know if God is real, but everything helps. And everyday I was in that shit prison, you wrote to me. Sometimes just a post-it note, but always something.

I was an ass to you; I never wrote back. I am sorry. This is me reaching back to you, but I know it’s not enough.
I was kept in jail for six months before my trial ever happened, just enough time for me to turn eighteen and be tried as an adult.

No one told me shit, and my public defender, ya he called me Randy during the first half of our trial. I think he tried his best, but he looked so stressed the entire time and kept mixing up his words and shit. I felt bad for the man.

I didn’t have a suit to wear to the trial, so I wore some khakis and a button down shirt I borrowed from a buddy of mine.

The shirt was meant for a guy twice my size, but it is what it is. I was hot with nerves. I think they purposely put bright lights in those rooms.

The judge claimed at the start of the trial he already knew how this would pan out. He said I just “looked bad.”

I’m assuming he meant because my hair was dreaded and my arms were covered in tattoo sleeves.

He said “I didn’t have a future anywhere but in here.” The judge meant prison when he said I belonged here.

Never underestimate the wrath of a man, or The Man. If some rich sorority girl was selling pills to her friends, she’d get a slap on the wrist and a fine if the judge was in a mood that day.

After the first half of the trial, I was really nervous. I was sweating all over my buddy’s shirt. But then we took a break and my public attorney told me to follow him. He said they were offering me a plea and he thinks I should take it. My PA didn’t help me. He didn’t even explain what a plea was, but I had read enough crime novels to understand the gists.
I thought it seemed like the only option.

I think I got screwed.

I’ve been getting screwed my whole life.

Even if my PA tried to explain anything, I could barely understand him because he was stuttering so badly. I think he said something along the lines of the minimum sentence for selling and intent to sell was fifteen years.

I could be looking at up to fifteen years if things didn’t go my way. And things were not looking like they would go my way.

If I took the plea, I would get six years plus probation. He said with good-time I would be out in three. It was better than any other offer.

I was only eighteen. I couldn’t spend fifteen years in here.

The judge said though, if he ever sees me back in his court, he’d give me the harshest sentence he could. If he was trying to scare me, it worked.

I learned quickly that prison’s like a zoo. We’re the animals just pacing in our cages.

Woof, Bitch.

A bunch of misfits who couldn’t function in normal life so they were sent to this dungeon to be mocked and ridiculed.
**First Stint in Prison**

During my first stint in prison, I realized how fucked up the system was. Let me give you an example.

I made $3.50 per month from my job working maintenance in the prison. Say I got sick. It cost $5 to make an appointment with the doctor and to get a doctor’s slip. It cost $5 more to go to the appointment and get checked out by the doctor. And it cost $5 to fill your prescription.

I’m not good at math, but I can tell you that those prices don’t add up. Fifteen dollars from start to finish just for proper health care. That is five months of work, just for one doctor’s appointment.

It’s a crime to be poor on the outside, and it’s hell to be poor on the inside.

When you don’t have money and you can’t find a job, you turn to panhandling. Panhandling is illegal, so now you get arrested. Well, you can’t afford your own attorney so you get a public attorney. The damn public attorney doesn’t even know your name, so you get the worst sentence. To succeed in prison you need to be rich.

I think this is really what happened in America. The government wanted to watch us burn.

I guess the government also wanted money. They allow drugs into America then bam they arrest you for using them. Damn hypocrites. But for each inmate, they make a hefty profit. They think we’re stupid. but we aren’t. We’re addicted, and that’s different.


My Momma was the only person I had while in prison. Sometimes she would have to go without dinners for a bit just to put money into my commissary, or onto her phone plan so we
could talk. I always wanted to talk to her. I coulda talked for hours, but I would try to keep it brief so I could save her some money.

It sucks not havin’ anyone. There are people in here who have visitors every single Wednesday and Sunday. I’ve been transferred twice now, each one more farther away from my Momma than the last.

She can’t take off a day of work to drive three hours to come visit for thirty-five minutes. I can’t ask her to do that. She’s getting too old. But yet, she would come as often as she could. Those days I got to see her cherry red lipstick and cheerful smile were the best.

I thought it would be easier if I flew solo for my six years in prison.

People aren’t meant to fly solo.

I regret pushing people away.

I thought that was the manly thing to do.

But I felt like less of a man than ever.

Prison had a way of stripping me of my masculinity.

I talked to the prison psychiatrist once.

I said I wanted to die.

He said I need to stop being dramatic.

He sent me back up to my cell.

That nights I swallowed three pieces of glass. The nightguard found me vomiting up blood in my cell. He came back fifteen minutes later with the medical team. The got the glass out before it killed me. If only they were slower. They normally are.
I got a week out of prison the time I swallowed the glass. It was good to be out of that shit hole, but it was weird.

Everything had just been going on without me, ya know? Like obviously I didn’t just think life would stop, but it’s like when I’m in that prison, I don’t exist. It fucked with my mind.

I was lucky though, because I only had to spend three years in prison. I got out really soon. They gave me three additional years of probation though. That’s what screwed me in the end.

See, when I got out, they returned me to my Momma. Which meant I went right back to my friends, my drugs, and my throne. I had to take a piss test every couple or weeks or so, but I got really good at faking those. Until, I got lazy.

I failed one piss test and got my ass sent right back to prison to serve my maximum sentence: fourteen years.
Prison Take Two

I never got many letters in prison, but I got a few. I mean, you sent me one everyday. Sissy, but I’m talking about letters from other people.

I remember one specifically. It was from a man I barely knew: your grandfather. I’m still not sure why he wanted to help me. You had probably asked him to, but it said this:

Hi Ray,

I met you at your sister’s High School graduation party. I’m 70 years old and I’ve been retired from corrections for about 22 years. I have been in corrections longer than you have been alive, so I’d listen up. Specifically, I was a Deputy Warden for over 20 years.

I’ve been married for 38 years and have two wonderful daughters and a superstar granddaughter. My life is very special but it wasn’t always special. I’m a recovering alcoholic. I quit drinking in 1960. In my opinion if I had not quit drinking I would either be dead now or locked up in a prison myself.

Ray, you have people who care about you and want only the best for you. I’m afraid that you have used up your second chances and will probably spend a while in prison. I am going to give you some advice that won’t be easy to follow but will save your life. The first thing you need to do is never drink or use drugs again in your life. In prison you need to live your life one day at a time. You need to do your very best to follow the guidance of the staff. You need to work hard at any job that you are assigned to do by the staff even if you don’t like it. You need to do your own time in prison. Doing your own time in prison means you don’t report other inmates for rule violations even if they do something to you. I don’t like telling you that as a former Deputy Warden but you can’t do anything that would label you a snitch. You should treat other
inmates with respect but do not become buddies with them. Never take anything from another inmate or give them anything. As best as you can keep your business to yourself. Do your own time and take it a day at a time. Going to prison will be terrible but if you follow my advice, you will get released one day a better man than when you went in there. Remember that you have a lot of people who care about you and want you to have a happy life. Everything starts with never drinking or using drugs. Ray, only you can change Ray and it must start now.

Sincerely,

Deputy Warden Cullen

I don’t know why I listened to this man I had met once, but I took his advice to heart, and I started doing my time for myself. I did this through reading and writing.

I never finished high school, but I used to love reading. It’s not that I wasn’t smart enough to finish, I just thought it was pointless. I knew I’d end up in prison one day, just like my friends and everyone else on my street, so why waste time trying to get a pointless degree.

You finished though. Despite being five years younger than me. I was glad I got to see you graduate.

It was at your high school graduation that I realized I was fake. I was just a messed up boy trying to fit into a boujee world. No one would buy it.

Momma bought me a nice shirt, the nicest shirt I’ve ever owned, just so I could cover my arms to hide the tats. I couldn’t hide my bloodshot eyes or my head of dreads though. I stood in the back with Momma so your friends wouldn’t see me. If you knew I was there, you would’ve showed me off proudly to your friends. I know you would’ve. But do you know how much shit you would’ve gotten from that? They would have laughed at you or pitied you. I know you
wouldn’t care, you used to always say you loved me no matter what. But, I cared, because I already made your life harder than it had to be.

You were really smart, and you were cool because of it. But I just couldn’t risk losing my friends. If they thought I thought I was better than them because I graduated high school or something like that, I would be all alone. I was smart in secret though. I really was, at least before the drugs really started to fuck with my mind. I would read a whole book every week. I would go to the town’s public library, because none of my homies would ever be caught dead there. I would sit in the very back where the older women had their book club, and I would just read. Sometimes, I would listen into what the women were saying about a certain book, if I had read it already. They were really smart.

One day, one of the women named Jane noticed me listening and said, “Hey boy. You agree with what Janie said?”

I was so caught off guard and apologized for listening in, but they just waited for my answer. The thing was, I didn’t agree with Janie. Normally, I would’ve just said “ya, I agree” to avoid confrontation, but it was weird. I felt as if I could actually say what I thought here. So, I did, and it felt good.

The women nodded their heads and told me to pull up my chair. They never asked about my life. We just talked books. I liked them a lot. I went to book club every week.

Reading was the only way I could escape what was happening in real life.

This was my secret as a kid, and it’s still my secret today. I never wrote much, but once I entered the system it became harder and harder to get a hold of good reading material. You know
they limit the number of books you’re allowed to have in your cell? Plus, books are expensive to send, and it’s not like Momma has that kinda money.

You can read in the library for an hour every week, but that’s not enough time. So, I started writing. I thought if reading let me escape, maybe writing would, too. If you tell anyone I write, I might have to shank you, just kidding. But seriously, I’ll get so much shit if people know I write, so maybe keep it to yourself. I’ve always wanted to show one person though, just to see if I’ve really got something. I probably don’t, though. I don’t know, it’s just nice to get outta my head sometimes.

I would sit in my cell all day. I would stare at the damn walls so much that I swear they started to move.

I counted my breaths, I counted tiles, I counted just to see how high I could count. Every other day they would let me out. I would get a lukewarm shower and a fifteen-minute phone call.

I would get to call Momma every other day. She was the only person on my calling list. When she died, I didn’t bother leave my cell for phone time. No one out there wanted to talk to me.

So, I would talk to myself. That’s how Zoo came to be. I thought, what if I could create my own world, and I did. It wasn’t for over a month that I convinced one of the guards to let me have paper and a pencil. Terry was a nice guard, one of the few. So he would let me write when he was on duty. I didn’t trust the other guards though, and I knew not to let my guard down. So every page of Zoo I wrote, I spent equal time memorizing it. Chanting the story over and over in my cell. The bastard next to me probably thought I was crazy, ha. Let him think that, it’s safer that way. People don’t mess with crazy.
If I’m being honest, I’ve always been jealous of the crazy people in here. The crazier the better. Schizophrenic Jack has more friends than I do. Big Ben has been in this coma trance thing for past year in solitary. Must be nice not knowing all the shit that goes on around you, ya know? Because let me tell you, with a sane mind it’s lonely and scary.

But back to the book. I had written up to chapter four over the first month of solitary, and I don’t know whether it was good or not, but it sure helped. That month wasn’t bad. I mean it was hell, but kind of bearable. I was finally doing something.

But, one day Terry isn’t at his regular post. Instead is this fat lard of a man named Jim who must’ve had a stick up his ass or something because he was bitching to everybody. When he came to my cell all smug he asked,

“Whatcha got there, 101593?”

“Just some writings.” I said back biting my tongue.

“Wouldn’t have thought you could write, good for you.” He spoke at me with sarcasm in his voice. “Maybe one day you’ll be famous.” He laughed a deep belly laugh and his fat wiggled disgustingly up and down.

“Maybe I will” I said to myself as he walked away, and I believed it, for a moment.

The bastard heard me and stormed back to my cell demanding I give him the paper. A whole month’s work.

I said, “No.”

He said, “I will make your life a living hell inmate 101593. Hand over the papers.”

“Bite me, lard ass.”
That was my comeback. *Bite me, lard ass.* I could’ve done better. It doesn’t matter though, it did the trick and riled him up. He pepper sprayed me in the eyes and shoved his way into my cell. When I regained vision, my papers were gone.

In this world, you can only trust yourself. Good thing I got my own back.

Joke’s on the lard ass, I had the whole thing memorized.

So, this story: it's about this world where people love going to the zoo, but it’s not like a normal zoo. Instead of animals, it has inmates. I’ve always felt kinda like a caged animal in here, so I don’t know; I just started writing. It's not very good, but it was fun to write I guess. I thought you might wanna read it, but I know I probably won’t see you again, so I thought I could read it to you. What do you think?

I’m gunna start, if that’s okay. I guess you could always fast forward. Ha, okay.
There was a white woman who resided in downtown Chicago, Illinois. Her name was Grace. She had no kids, and she lived alone, but she was fine. She always longed for love, but it never seemed to find her. She was fine, just fine. One day in late July when the sun shone brightly and harshly, Grace got a call from her sister.

“Hey Grace, I’m so sorry to bother you, but my babysitter called last minute and can’t watch little Sydney today. I know you hate when I ask, but could you please take her? I have an important meeting at work and don’t know who else to call.”

“Sis, you know I’m not good with kids. I want to help, but I don’t even know what I’d do with her.” Replied Grace as she sipped a mimosa while whipping up a personal breakfast for one.

“It’s Saturday babe, just take her to the Zoo. Kids love it there. You remember how much fun we had, and she won’t be a problem for you at all.”

Grace did remember the fun. It was Chicago’s claim to fame: the world’s largest zoo, with the most dangerous beasts known to man!

She always longed to go back and gaze at the wild beasts and the fantastic fiends. It was her happy place as a kid, but a little weird for an adult woman to be wandering around there alone.

“You don’t think she’d be scared?” Asked Grace hoping the answer was no, and that she could resubmerge herself into the mysteries that this wonderland holds.

“She’s six years old, Grace. We started going when we were only four. She will be fine, plus all the beasts are locked in a cage.”
“Fine. Bring her over in thirty minutes. Don’t be late. I love you.” Said Grace downing her glass.

“You’re a savior! Thank you. Oh, and make sure you get Sydney one of those pictures they offer! You know, the ones where you get to pose next to a real life wild beast!”

“Sure thing, sis. See you soon.” Replied Grace with a smirk on her face. Of course she’d get her niece one of those pictures. Everyone gets one on their first visit. She had hers framed in her room.
Sydney was delivered promptly at a quarter till ten on Grace’s front steps by her mother who scurried away with a frantic wave.

“Hi, Sweetheart.” Said Grace forcing her voice to enter a higher, kid-friendly octave.

She reached down uncomfortably and embraced the small child in a hug that lasted barely half a second. “Are you ready for a fun day?”

“Yes, Auntie Grace.” Replied the timid child.

“I still remember my first day at the zoo. My dad took your mother and myself and we spent the entire day there. There were so many colorful and exciting beasts to look at. We even got to go on one of the wild game hunting safaris! It was the best day of my life.”

“Ooh, can we do that?” Squealed Sydney.

“Obviously, we’re gunna do everything! You’ll love the Zoo just as much as I did. Let’s go.” She said leading the way to her car and closing the door behind Sydney.

Grace always had a good life. She got good grades as a kid, and had a handful of kind friends, but she always felt a tinge of loneliness in this world. It was as if she didn’t fully belong. But she didn’t fully not belong either. She just kind of floated in the middle somewhere. When Grace was at the Zoo though, she had this special clarity. As a young girl trying to understand life around her, Grace felt as if she finally understood her place in this world. She was where she belonged. She used to say she’d be a zoo keeper when she was older, maybe she could still achieve that dream. Or maybe Sydney could carry the team on that one.
Grace programmed the car with the address of the Zoo which she recalled from memory, and she and Sydney arrived at the large gates only fifteen minutes later. Reaching down for Sydney’s hand, Grace said, “Honey you’re shaking. Are you alright?”

“I’m just so excited!” She said with a dopey grin plastered to her face. “All my friends have been to the Zoo, but Mom was always too busy to take me! I really hope we can do a Safari ride. Or that the Worker Beasts are up and moving today. When my friend Julie came, she said the workers were on strike and were just sleeping. Lame!”

“Haha, oh honey, I’m sure the Queen Beast whipped them into shape! Strikes aren’t allowed for the Worker Beasts. It’s a shame they ruined Julie’s experience with their selfishness! Hopefully all the Beasts will behave today.”

They began their walk from the car park to the entrance, but stopped momentarily to gaze at the large infrastructure of this institution. Sydney’s eyes bulged as she looked around at the silver castle of spikes and silos that extended far beyond her eye’s reach. In her child-mind, she saw a palace fit for a queen.

Men stationed in the silos stood erect, ready to protect Her Majesty. These men donned outfits of metal in preparation for any imminent attack. Their faces were harsh and stoic, but softened immediately into a smile when little Sydney gazed up at them with her dopey grin and waved her hand fervently.

Smiles extended across the guards faces and they returned the wave eagerly. With guns held firmly in the guards’ hands, they danced in circles and feigned shooting at dangerous attackers.

Sydney giggled and jumped around encouraging the men to keep up the charades.
Grace used to giggle like this with her hand held securely in her father’s hand. But, she didn’t laugh today. Perhaps she woke up too early and was still tired. Perhaps things just aren’t the same as they were decades ago.

The pair of women began walking again and crossed through the massive gates that lead to wonderland. The gates were heavy and intricately designed with various metals: about sixty locks lined the front of it. As the gates slinked open slowly and mechanically, the metal on the hinges squeaked. The high pitched squeal resonated in Grace’s ears making her shudder momentarily.

Sydney once again giggled with delight at the sights and noises around her.

Grace regained her smile and proceeded through the gates. She could have sworn the Zoo was in better condition when she was a kid.

“Now don’t be scared, sweetie. We are about to go through the metal detector! I was scared my first time, but the guards just like to put on a show for the kids. You ready?” Grace asked.

“I’m ready!” Sydney exclaimed tightening her grip on Grace’s hand.

“Remove all personal belongings. Children enter first. Adults wait your turn. No holding hands. Heads up. Move. Now!” A guard in a full uniform decked out with ornaments and decorations of service yelled. His face was stoic, but at the last minute, he flashed a soft smile at a nervous Sydney.

“Arms up in the sky, we have to make sure nothing comes into the Zoo that we don’t know about. Now proceed little girl.”

“But why can’t we bring anything in?” Asked Sydney curiously.
“Because, can you imagine the terror these wild Beasts could cause if they got their hands on anything from the outside” The guard shuddered and gave Sydney a pat on the head. “They could ruin the world with just a banana.”

Sydney laughed and walked through the large scanning device with her head held high and arms held higher. She was cleared! Thank god.

“Show me your feet!” Yelled another guard on the other side of the apparatus. “Now young lady.”

“Huh?”

“Lift up your feet sweetie and show the man the bottoms.” Grace yelled from the other side of the scanning machine. “It’s so they know you aren’t being sneaky and bringing in something like gum taped to your shoe to feed the Beasts!”

“Oh, Aunt Grace, I wanna feed the beasts!” Lamented Sydney.

“We will, but only Zoo food! Let’s keep the gum for us.” Responded Grace as she was motioned through the metal detector and given the same precautionary instructions of lifting her feet.

After passing through the metal detector unscathed, Grace and Sydney were told to take a seat and a number. There were over two hundred guests there already seated in the white plastic chairs with a little slip of paper stating a number from one to two-hundred and one.

“Grace, it’s gunna take so long to get through this line.” Whined Sydney who was anxious to get through the admissions process.

“Trust me babe, it’ll go fast and it’ll be so worth it!” Reassured Grace as she looked around at the eager families seated near her. Children as young as three and elderly as old as one
hundred and three talked among themselves about the excitement that waited behind the ticket booth.

“One hundred ninety-nine.” A guard yelled out in a booming voice.

A family of four stood up and collected their things that had become strewed around them. The two young boys each held a personal camera tightly in their small hands. They were prepared to capture the Beasts in their glory.

The kind mother pushed the boys along past Grace’s eyesight to go redeem their ticket.

“Auntie, we’re next!” Said Sydney who was standing and pacing around in anticipation. The two women had been waiting in this section of admissions for over an hour, until,

“Two hundred!” Yelled the guard. Sydney squealed with delight and ran forward dragging Grace behind her.

“Good afternoon ladies, right this way.” Said the guard escorting the girls to a separate room that extended for blocks. It was filled with low-hung rings that the guard instructed the women to proceed forward through.

While the lower rings were easier for Sydney, she struggled to get through the higher hung ones. Luckily, Grace and Sydney had each other and could help when the other struggled.

Each ring represented one year the Zoo had been in production. When Grace was young, there were few rings to jump through, but now, it took her and Sydney almost half an hour to clear the obstacles. Still, it’ll be worth the effort.

Sydney and Grace came out of the hoop course out of breath and sweaty.

“I need water.” Claimed an overheated Sydney.
“You would think they’d have some for visitors. It’s okay though, we will get some when we get inside. Deal?” Said Grace.

“Deal.” Affirmed Sydney.

“Follow me one last time, ladies.” Encouraged the guard showing them the way to a ticket booth. “This is where you will purchase your ticket for the best day of your lives!”

Grace stepped up to the booth where a young man sat half working and half playing some colorful game on his phone.

When he saw the two guests he slid his phone under the desk and turned to them with a forced smile, saying, “Welcome to the Zoo, the most magical place on Earth. We hold the countries highest number of exotic Beasts. With roughly nine thousands beasts to choose from, you could spend days in here. But careful not to get left behind because anyone found wandering the Zoo at night gets locked up and may never get out again!” He chuckled slightly at his attempt to scare the little girl, but Sydney just smiled at him in awe.

“We have Large Bellied Beasts, and Worker Beasts, Black Beasts, Brown Beasts, and Polar Beasts, and everything in between. General admission starts at $75 per person per day. Additional activities cost additional money. A picture with the world’s most dangerous Beast will cost you $50 per person per picture. Each wild game hunting safari ranges from $50-$150 depending on the package you want to order. We also have meal tickets for purchase and souvenirs at the exit of the Zoo.”

“Sheesh.” Said Grace under her breath. “Prices really have gone up. We’ll take two general admissions, one picture with the beast, and two safari’s please.”
“Got it.” Said the worker taking Grace’s money and handing her a pile of tickets in return. “Proceed into the Zoo at your own leisure and let me know if you have any questions.” He promptly picked up his phone and resumed his game.

Grace and Sydney walked past the ticket booth into the crazy land of wild Beasts. It was fantastic and extraordinary. Sounds of clinking metal and gates closing and opening filled Sydney’s ears. She stood still and absorbed all the colors and lights into her small mind and she gasped when she saw a fabulously decorated zoo keeper marching past her. Images of colored beasts and their stories hung on flag poles displayed largely around the Zoo, and a primal scent entered into the girl’s olfactory systems. The scent was musky and foul, but yet it made Sydney smile largely.

“Let’s get a map, Sydney.” Said Grace.

“Ok.” Sydney said running forward to grab a large brochure from a wooden stand nearby. She unfolded it hastily to reveal a large diagram of the Zoo printed in vibrant colors. Her heart raced as she read off different areas of interest in a high pitched voice.

“The Black, Brown, and Polar Beasts are just to our left! And the Petting Zoo is right next to them. And look, the Parrots are right next to them. We have to go now! Come on, Auntie Grace!” She said yanking on Grace’s shirt.

Grace followed closely behind as they embarked to their first exhibit: The Black, Brown, and Polar Beasts. As they began their journey to the cage, they heard a cacophony of screeches and howls from the Beasts. Sydney followed suit and let out a ridiculous howl in response. Children everywhere imitated the callings of the Beasts. War cries filled the skies.
Black, and Brown, and Polar Beasts, Oh My.

Grace and Sydney followed their intricately labeled map down an artificially cobbled pathway covered by an interwoven rooftop of plastic tree leaves.

“Look, Auntie, we’re in the jungle!” Exclaimed Sydney.

“The plastic jungle.” Said Grace under her breath. “You’re right sweetie, it’s pretty cool.” She responded to Sydney.

“I wanna see the Black Beasts!” She said running ahead of Grace to read the signs.

*Hairline trigger, do not provoke the beast.*

*Beast crossing.*

*Watch your fingers.*

*Black Beasts this way.*

Signs were posted everywhere creating an atmosphere of suspense. Soon, the girls would be in the presence of the most dangerous Beasts on this land. This Zoo does boast afterall: *With only 5% of the world’s wild Beast population, our Zoo captures 25% of the wild Beasts in zoos.*

*We are the biggest, we are the baddest, we are the best.*

“Syd, don’t stray too far ahead, it could be dangerous!” Yelled Grace.

“Then hurry up!” Retorted Sydney in a hurry.

“Babe, it’s not like they’re going anywhere.”

Sydney chuckled at this and said, “You’re right, Auntie! They’ll be here forever!”

“Yes, this is their home.” Said Grace a little quieter than before.

“Look, there they are!” Exclaimed Sydney running full speed up to a large metal cage.
Inside the cage were six Black Beasts with jet black, silky skin that glistened in the intense sunlight. There was such a beauty that exuded from them; a air of strength that contrasted the shackles around their limbs.

All six of the Beasts were men, and their skin was taught around their muscular frames. They paced back and forth at the front of the cage growling and snarling at the children that came to watch.

Sydney stood in awe of these Beasts: things she had never seen before on the outside.

“Do they talk, Gracie?” Asked Sydney.

“I think they used to, but they don’t anymore. I think the Zoo silences them when they come in, you know, just makes it easier that way.” Explained Grace.

“That makes sense. It would be crazy to have nine thousand Beasts talking all at once!” Sydney giggled at the crazy thought.

“Look here, Sydney.” Said Grace pointing to a wooden podium outside of the cage. On it there was writing and pictures of each beast. “It shows you the bios of each Beast.”

Sydney began reading the bios and matching them with the corresponding beast in the cage.

Beast 0487

*Found rummaging through a trash can, homeless on the streets of downtown Chicago.*

Reeked of booze and was found carrying two ounces of marijuana in his coat pocket. Beast 0487 is a gentle beast, but needed to be contained lest he harm innocent citizens. His drug and alcohol use are unacceptable, thus, he will be safe from harm in this facility. Beast 0487 joined us on
March 14, 2018 and will say goodbye March 14, 2048. We enjoy your company 0487 and look forward to your stay.

“Ooh I bet he’s that old one! The one with gray hair and the hunched back!” Said Sydney pointing to a Beast that was seen resting his shackles on a table provided in the cage. “He looks like he could’ve been homeless, but so does that scrawny one.”

“I think that scrawny one is Beast 7045. Look, read his profile.”

Beast 7045

Small, but powerful. Beast 7045 will do anything for a little cocaine, including rob a convenience store. Beast 7045 was brought to us in April of this year and will remain with us for fifty years. Come back every year and watch this beast grow from a scrawny boy into a chiseled man. While no one was hurt in the robbery, Beast 7045 did have a gun and we believe the intent to kill. Watch out, you could be next!

“You’re right.” Said Sydney to Grace. “The small one is definitely 7045. ‘I’m so glad they caught him! That’s literally the coolest job ever!’

“Yeah, until one of the wild Beasts bites you.” Joked Grace moving suddenly to tickle the giggling Sydney. She was having a great time. It made Grace nostalgic about her first time here. It was so different back then, though. The trees seemed realer, the cages seemed bigger, and the whole place seemed less, selfish. Just something about how much everything costs now, and how many Beasts are in each cage, doesn’t sit right with Grace. She shakes it off however, because this day is all about Sydney.

“Can we go to the Polar Beasts next? They were always some of my favorites!” Said Grace.
“Yeah! We can see the Brown Beasts on the way!” Replied Sydney.

The pair walked slowly to the next exhibit following the clearly marked path. They sauntered past the Brown Beasts, but Sydney said she didn’t want to waste time going to see them. She’d rather see the Polar Beasts.

Looking to her left at the small cage filled with twelve Brown Beasts, Sydney asked, “Why don’t they put some of those Beasts in with the Black Beasts? There was more room in their cages.”

“Because sweetie, we can’t mix the Beasts. You read how dangerous they were on their own, right.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Well, if you start mixing colors, Beasts start to not get along and that could lead to fights.” Explained Grace nonchalantly.

“Why wouldn’t a Black Beast and a Brown Beast get along? They’re all Beasts!”

“We don’t know. Something in their brains just tells them to only be nice to Beasts that look like them. When I was a kid, they tried putting the Polar Beasts in with the Black Beasts, just for an hour because they needed to clean the cage. Well, thirteen Beasts entered, and only one beast was left alive. It was a bloody mess! Those lucky kids who got to see that.

But they realized, they would lose too many Beasts that way and it was too expensive to clean up the cages after, so they segregate them now.” Grace stopped at the next exhibit and looked in at the eight Polar Beasts meandering about in their cages.

These Beasts white skin reflected the sun’s rays and caused a glare in Grace’s eyes. She put her sunglasses on and peered deeper into the cage.
“Look at that one.” She said pointing to a beast with marks covering his body. His whiteness still shined through, but it was deflected by the mosaic on his skin. This Beast crawled toward the front of the cage on all fours dragging his shackles slowly behind him.

Sydney cowarded behind Grace’s body, but peered her head out eager to see the terrible Beast.

“What’s his story, Auntie?” Sydney asked timidly.

“Well, let’s see.” Said Grace reading through the biographies of the Beasts trying to find one that matched this Beast’s description. “Ah, here we go.”

_Beast 8099_

_Despite being only twenty-one years old, Beast 8099 remains one of our fiercest beings. He is strong willed and vulgar. He is heartless and quick witted. He is a lethal combination of traits that ensure he will be locked in here until he dies. Beast 8099 was captured after having killed an innocent civilian one May afternoon. The murder was found to be in cold blood._

_Nothing was taken from the civilian, other than his life. Why did Beast 8099 kill this man? We don’t know. Go ahead and ask him yourself._

Beast 8099 let out a deep roar from the bottom of his belly that resounded throughout the entire exhibit. He shook his blonde mane angrily and clenched his shackled fists.

“Wow.” Said Sydney with big eyes and an open mouth.

A zookeeper noticed the rawr and rushed hastily to the cage. He took his bat and beat the edge of the cage with great force causing the structure to shake and creak.

“Quiet down, Beast 8099 or I will come in there and personally beat you until you are silent.” He turned to little Sydney still standing behind Grace’s protective body.
“Would you like to give it a swing, little girl? It’s great fun, fills you with this rush of power!” He said excitedly.

Sydney looked up at Grace for a nod of approval, which Grace eagerly gave. Beating the Beasts is an honor few get, especially their first visit. Sydney was incredibly lucky to get to experience this. Perhaps she will pursue zookeeping after all, when she’s older.

The bat was almost the size of Sydney, but she courageously stepped forward and took it in her fragile arms. She walked up to the cage slowly. Her whiteness was mirrored by the whiteness that shone in the cage. She took a deep breath and swung the bat as hard as she could.

The cage rattled slightly, but the Beasts inside leap backwards. She threw her head back and laughed profusely with glee. Grace had never seen the Beasts feign fear to make a little girl happy. Perhaps these Beasts were different.

Grace shook that idea from her mind. After all, these Beasts are murderers.

“Come on back, honey. That was awesome! How do you feel?” Asked Grace.

“I feel like I’m on top of the world!” Yelled Sydney beating her chest and running in circles.

“You are the most powerful little girl in all of Chicago!” Reinforced Grace. “Where to next?”

“Umm, what about the Parrots? Julie always would talk about them! Apparently, they repeat whatever you say to them!”

“Alright. Parrots it is.” Said Grace and the two of them proceeded past the Polar Beasts and waved goodbye at the kind zookeeper.
Parrots

When Grace was a little girl, there was only one parrot. They were going extinct around then, but now, now there are hundreds that fly around the cage all mimicking one another in unison.

The lone parrot used to be so special. Yes, it was a little neurotic and kooky and its head would twitch whenever it repeated something, but it had caregivers looking out for it. It was supported. How can the caregivers look after hundreds of neurotic parrots?

Grace and Sydney walked up to the parrot exhibit and saw such a vast array of shapes and sizes and colors of Beasts. They were magnificent looking. Each Beast donned the same light blue nightgown, but yet each individual personality shined through brightly.

On the ground, underneath the beautiful Beasts, pill capsules were scattered around.

Messy eaters. Thought Sydney.

Blue ones and red one and white ones. They were all over, half eaten, and the other half lying wasted on the ground.

The waste was of little concern, because in multiple large feeding bins spread out in the cage, there were heaps more of those colorful pills waiting to be consumed. No Beast will go hungry. Thankfully.

Sydney observed the parrots for almost ten minutes before speaking. She watched as some fluttered around the tightly packed cage bumping into others like a game of bumper cars, and some stood motionless with an unaltering gaze. The high energied ones acted with strange and unfamiliar motions to Sydney. They would walk briskly, and then stop abruptly. They would
twitch their shoulders and cock their necks. They would tic: a repetitive motion of their head like a defective robot. They were mythical creatures.

The motionless ones were equally enthralling. Standing on a perch, or sitting on the ground like a child, these beings would equate themselves to statues. Their shoulders would slump and their eyelids would droop low, they looked as if they were melting.

“Look Sydney.” said Grace pointing to a sign that hung on the cage.

*Challenge: can you get us to move?* It read.

Sydney and Grace both tried provoking the Beast.

They joined in with the other children making large gestures and loud noises directed at the motionless Beasts. No response.

They tried tapping the cage bars with a stick they found laying on the ground. No response.

They tried picking up pebbles and throwing them into the open cage to hit the Beast and encourage him to wake up. No response. Just a slow blink of the eyes.

Fascinating.

Grace watched as some spoke to others in a choppy disoriented type of speech, and some spoke to themselves: engaging in an elaborate discussion. She marveled at how one Beast could chatter to himself for so long. Did he not need a response? Or, did he get a response and we just can’t hear it?

*I am stuck in here, let me out.* One would say to himself.

*You are not stuck, you’re stuck in your mind.* He would respond.

*It’s the Zookeepers, they aren’t good.*
Don’t go spreading rumors, they might hear you. You know what happens if they hear you. Bad things happen if they hear you. Don’t let them hear you.

I am stuck in here, let me out.

No one cares, no one will ever let you out.

I NEED out. I have a family. I have a life.

You had a family. You had a life.

Let me out, I’m stuck in here.

You’ll never get out.

This eerie conversation between one Beast went on and one.

Others engaged in their own conversations side by side, but never together. They were beautiful songbirds chattering away their time oblivious to the observers below. They weren’t all oblivious though, some engaged delightfully with the captive audience outside their cage.

“I am a Beast.” A child would chime.

“I am a Beast.” The Beast would recite back harmoniously causing an uproar of excitement from the crowds.

The child would try it again.

“I am a stupid Beast.”

“I am a stupid Beast.”

An even louder uproar.

“I am crazy”

“I am crazy.”
The kids and their parents would be ecstatic at these responses. They would prod the repetitive Beast continuously until they tired of his amusement.

The Beast would recite these phrases back patiently all while staring back with his glossed over eyes and his robotic movements. At each phrase, he would cock his head to the side, and with a doped up smile, dutifully recite his part back.

The perfectly docile and cooperative Beast.

Tiring from observing the Beasts, Sydney moved to the wooden post that accompanied all Beasts’ cages. She read one of the hundreds of biographies mounted on the smooth hickory:

Beast 0001

This is where it all began ladies and gentlemen. Beast 0001 was our first Beast at the Zoo. Captured decades ago by Zookeeper Allen doing a routine sweep of the downtown strip. He spotted this Beast engaging in unspeakable acts with a minor. “But she is only a month away from being a consenting adult.” The Beast argued. Our Zookeeper stood his ground however, and enforced the law to a T. We are all incredibly proud of his work.

At one point a Black Beast, Beast 0001 slowly underwent a metamorphosis into the parrot you know and love today. Ask him anything and he will recite it, but count your blessings because he was not always this way. For years, we thought Beast 0001 was special. We did not think Beasts could change forms, but after his transition we have seen this time and time again. Once a fervent fighter, now a tame Beast. Come play with us.

“That’s so cool, Auntie. I get to see the first ever Beast captured!” Said Sydney. “Can we feed it?”
“Yeah, it’s crazy this parrot was here when I was a kid. I thought he’d be put back in the wild by now, but I guess he’s happy here. And sure thing, I think I have some more cash in my bag.” Grace fumbled around in her bag and pulled out two crisp twenty dollar bills.

She handed one to Sydney and kept one for herself, and both girls walked over to the feeding machine to the right of the cage. The machine was filled with the most beautiful pills that existed in every color known to man. It was a rainbow of Beast food and Sydney found this delightful.

Sydney danced around the machine marveling at the pink pills and the green ones. There were round ones and oval ones, and there were big ones and small ones. Every pill you could ever want. Sydney slid her twenty dollar bill happily into the machine and selected her two favorite colors: pink and blue.

She cupped her hands below and prepared herself for the heavy flow of pretty pills that dropped into her hands. Grace did the same, but she chose orange and yellow pills. She thought they seemed happy.

Both girls traipsed back to their spot in front of the cage with hands struggling to hold all the food. Slowly they began flinging small amounts of this yummy food into the cage. Parrots would catch it gracefully in their mouths; they were pros at this by this point.

Beast 0001 got first dibs on any food that was thrown, so Grace and Sydney observed how other Beasts made room for Beast 0001 to get his fill. Once he was satisfied, the other Beasts swarmed the area competing for the most food.
Sydney would throw a handful of food right in between two Beasts and watch as they fought it out for the larger share. She jumped around energetically when one Beast would shove another away from “his” food.

“You can’t just let him take your food. Stand up for yourself” She would yell to the Beast who got shoved.”

The Beasts would continue their fights with no interruption from the Zookeepers.

Grace looked around and felt sorry for the motionless Beasts who received only the picked over leftovers of thrown food at the end of the day. She took her handfuls of food and threw them gently in front of the motionless Beasts.

At first, they didn’t respond. They remained motionless and staring ahead.

But slowly, a Beast would notice the food and hurriedly shovel it into his eager mouth. He would eat it as fast as he could, constantly looking around to ensure his safety.

*It could be a trap.* He would say to himself.

*Stop worrying so much. Eat the food. You haven’t eaten in three days.*

*The guards feed us every morning.*

*Yeah, but this is the good stuff.*

*It’s the same stuff.*

*No, this makes us feel good.*

*Yeah, that stuff makes us feel bad.*

Grace looked at the pleased Beast and felt a warm touch of happiness reach her. She did good. She threw the last remaining nibbles in her hands and looked around for Sydney. She was still causing chaos in the cages, but her food supply was almost out. Time to go.
As she reached Sydney and motioned for her to follow to the next exhibit, the loud speakers came on.

*Good day Zoo goers!* Said a cheerful intercom voice that resonated through their entire Zoo. *Today is your lucky day, because we just captured two Beasts!* Cheers bellowed up from the guests and filled the air with excitement. *You are all cordially invited to watch their intake process starting in only ten minutes. Hurry on over folks, this is not something you want to miss.*
Intake

“Sydney, I’ve always wanted to see an intake!” Said Grace grinning a dopey smile that matched that of Sydney early on. “You are literally so lucky to see this your first time at the Zoo.”

“Auntie, be cool.” Said a snarky Sydney. “Intakes happen like everyday now.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize. I only ever saw one my entire childhood.” Responded Grace.

“Yeah, Julie has already seen three. I still want to go though.”

“Well, okay, yeah. Let’s go before all the good watching spots get taken.”

“Okay.” Said Sydney as the two of them began walking to the front of the Zoo.

They passed by the Parrots who were still busy chattering away either with themselves or any guest who would listen. They passed by the Black, Brown, and Polar Beasts who were pacing in their cages and snarling at passing by Zookeepers. And they passed growing crowds of people of all ages eager to see the show.

At the front of the Zoo, the Zoozeeper stood proudly with a Beast in chains at his feet. He addressed the crowds of people videotaping him and capturing this moment with their phones. The crowd oohed and ahhed, encouraging the Zookeeper with their eager engagement.

“Hello, ladies and gentlemen of the Zoo.” Said the Zookeeper in a deep and manly voice.

“Are you ready for the show of your lives?”

The audience yelled yes in unison. Cheers and chants were raised up.

Take down the Beast.

Take down the Beast.

Take down the Beast.
They yelled.

The Zookeeper motioned for silence and with a roar of his voice he yelled, “I will take down the Beast today. He stands no chance against the power of my whip and the strength of my people!”

The Zookeeper dressed in the finest quality clothes and decorated with medals and ribbons slashed his whip in the air and caused the air to crack with its force. The Beast reared up on his hind legs and struggled against the restraints, but the Zookeeper thrashed the whip upon the Beast’s body and the once cocky being was put in his place. The fiend laid low at his master’s feet and quieted his roars.

“This Beast, who shall be named Beast 9001, was captured today at twelve forty two pm in the Northern suburb of the city. The Beast was found lurking in the alleyway between 13th and Speckled carrying a large quantity of diamond jewelry in his bag. This diamond jewelry matched the description of the jewelry stolen early that day from a local diamond shop. Beast 9001 was homeless at the time of his capture and was the father of three young children.”

The crowded booed loudly at this mention of children.

“Yes, it is a shame, but the children were adopted into the state and justice will be served to their father. This Beast is not gentle. He is a stealing and lying Beast who deserves to spend the next five decades in this institution for you all to marvel at him.”

“It was for my kids. It was all for my kids. I couldn’t afford food. I was laid off of my job. They were hungry.” Plead the Beast on all fours.

*Take his voice.*

*Take his voice.*
Take his voice.

The unruly crowd yelled.

“Silence Beast. I don’t believe a word you say. You are now and you always will be a Beast. Now, join me in welcoming Beast 9001 to the Zoo!” He threw his arms up in the air and cracked his whip down once again unto the Beast.

The Beast yelped and curled into a fetal position on the ground.

“Get up!” Yelled the Zookeeper, and in unison the crowd chanted:

On your feet Beast.

On your feet.

On your feet.

“Auntie, what does the Zoo do with the Beasts when they’re done with them?”

Whispered Sydney to Grace.

“Well, they return them to the wild.” Said Grace.

“After five whole decades?”

“Well, it might be different now from when I was a little girl. Back then, the Zoo used to take in injured Beasts and fix them. They would make them right in the head and right in the bodies and when they returned them, they would thrive in the wild. But, now that the Zookeepers own the Zoos themselves, I think they’re keeping the Beasts for longer.” Explained Grace.


“The longer you keep a Beast, the more money the Zoos can make. Now, shhh I’m watching the intake.”
The Zookeeper lifted the Beast to his feet and walked him over to a group of men dressed in all white scubs. Their hands were covered to their elbows in yellow gloves, and their feet were protected by rubber boots.

“We will now groom the Beast. We are dedicated to providing the best assistance to our Beasts as we can here.” Said the Zookeeper.

The crowd cheered and sang the Zookeeper’s praises.

The Beast was lead to the men in white and made to remove all his clothing. He slowly stripped his hole-covered shirt from his whipped back and his soiled pants from his trembling legs. He stood naked in front of the men and women of the Zoo, and was doused with a soapy concoction used to rid him of parasites, fleas, and lice.

After a minute of soaking, the men in white sprayed him with a high pressure hose and handed him a Zoo-issued set of linens, the nicest clothes he had worn in months.

He slowly dressed himself without looking up at the crowd of cheering people.

His shoulders drooped and his head hung low, but Grace caught his eyes for a split second. In his eyes, she saw a broken man, not a wild Beast. He looked scared, and he looked sorry for what he had done. She could imagine stealing as well if her family needed her help.

She shook her head and reminded herself that the law is the law, there is no grey, and she forced her hands to clap along with the audience as the Beast donned his light grey jumpsuit and was lead away to the intake cage.

The intake cage holds all new Beasts until their assigned section can be determined. In this cage, it is day twenty-four-seven. Often new Beasts are boring for the guests to observe due to their tendency to sleep for long stretches of time. Thus, a Zookeeper is tasked with the job of
waking the beasts every one hour. The Zookeeper will bang on the cage until the Beast rises and makes four laps in the cage. At night, lights are shined onto the cage to simulate daylight.

Once the beast has been observed and it is clear which habitat he will best thrive in, he is removed from the intake cage and placed with his new Beast family.

While often this transition process is seamless, sometimes there is resistance from the current Beasts in the habitat to accept a new member. Fights have been known to occur, but those are included in the general admission price for guests, so are a treat when they happen.

While resistance is not uncommon, often older Beasts will take newer Beasts under their wings and provide a mentor type relationship. Watching the two Beasts grow together is a beautiful sight and rewards our long time and frequent guests for their continued support of the Zoo.

Because the Zoo is currently facing an overcrowding problem, the newly taken in Beast was taken to an already occupied intake cage which he will share until an available one opens up. While the intake cage used to be a solitary cage, current situations have forced the Zoo to improvise until more habitats can be created.

In just the last year, the zoo population has risen twenty five percent: a feat marveled at by the Zoo workers and guests alike.

From this overcrowding, Zookeepers have profited greatly, making Zookeeping a highly sought after job. Sydney really would make a great Zookeeper.

Grace whispers to Sydney who is engrossed in the spectacle of the intake, “Let’s follow the Beast to his intake cage.”

“Why, Auntie, we saw all the fun stuff.” Replied Grace.
“I’m just curious what happens with him, there’s something different about this Beast.”

“Then can we go see the Jumbo Beast?” Said Sydney impatiently.

“Of course, sweetie.”

The two girls waited until the crowds thinned and the Beast began his journey to his new home. They walked six paces behind the Beast and the Zookeepers and during the entire trip Grace fought thoughts of sympathy for this being from her mind.

Grace and Sydney watched as the cowering Beast was shoved into the small cage, barely big enough for one Beast, let alone two, and Grace’s heart beat faster when the Zookeeper employed the power of his whip once more.

A hearing the shriek of the Beast, Sydney smiled in delight: the exact reaction Grace would’ve had as a child.

The broken Beast curled up in a ball on the floor of the cage and nursed his wounds and spirit. His pitiful eyes reached Grace’s once more and begged for understanding and empathy. Grace had to look away.

“What do you say we go see this Jumbo Beast now?” Grace said hastily.

“Yeah! He’s just over there.” Sydney exclaimed pointing to an exhibit to the left of the intake cage.

The pair left Beast 9001 alone with his new cage mate and his newly broken spirit, and they proceeded onto the next attraction. It was mid day now, and the heat was intense, but they both donned hats that shielded them from the sun: something they were incredibly grateful for as sweat began to drip off their bodies.

“It would suck to be a Beast on a day like this.” Said Sydney.
“Yeah, it really would.” Replied Grace.
The Jumbo Beasts

The Jumbo Beasts are the largest Beasts in the Zoo. They each weigh in at over three hundred pounds of pure evil and they are dangerous beyond belief. One in particular caught Grace and Sydney’s eyes: Beast 5076.

His face and body were covered in an array of intricately designed tattoos that documented his life. He left no part of his body uncolored by this ink. His eyelids and cheekbones, shoulders and back, were all marked up by his and other’s work.

His hair was shaved in a military like buzz cut and matched the tough-man persona his tattoos gave off. His muscles bulged from his arms and legs, but his stomach protruded with a layer of fat.

The Jumbo Beasts are watched twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week to ensure they never escape. With their size, they can never hide.

These fiends are placed in solitary cages with walls lined with one-way mirrors. Thus, they constantly see their own ugly reflection. They see no one but themselves, but everyone sees them.

Both Zookeepers and Zoo members are able to keep a watchful eye over these Beasts. While some sleep, others exercise. While some eat, some entertain themselves with imaginary games in their minds. If only we knew what these beasts were thinking.

Grace and Sydney kept a watchful eye on Beast 5076.

They observed his every movements and were delighted to gain such insight into a wild Beast’s life.

0230: Beast appears agitated. Pacing his cage and snarling at guests.
0235: Beast relieves himself in his cage. The Zoo guests laugh hysterically and the Beast growls at them.

0245: Beast drinks water from the water bin located in the corner of his cage and sits on the ground. He stares out at the crowd knowing they are there but being unable to see them. He remains in this motionless state for ten minutes.

0255: The Beast does one hundred pushups while sweat pours down his back.

0320: The Beast takes another drink of water and curls into a ball to sleep. The crowd boos and throws rocks at his cage to wake him.

He ignores the noise and attempts to sleep.

The Zookeepers intervene to prevent the laziness of the Beast from ruining the guests’ days.

The Zookeepers are in charge of monitoring the Beasts’ activity throughout the days and ensuring order in the Zoo. They are brave and fierce men who don flashy whips to ensure their safety and the safety of all involved. They work with dangerous Beasts, so they must prepare for anything and everything.

They are tough on the Beasts, but Beasts like structure.

They watch the Beasts’ every move, but constant surveillance is what reduces chaos.

The Zookeepers are also in charge of feeding time.

To get Beast 5076 up and moving, the Zoopkeeper brings over a pail of slop to encourage movement.

“Hello, ladies and gentlemen.” Says the Zookeeper addressing the crowd.
“Today you are the lucky few who get to see Beast 5076 being fed. In the wild these Beasts can devour intense amounts of meat, but we have done extensive research to learn that they can survive and thrive on only two dollars worth of meal per day!”

The crowded gasped at this fact and applauded loudly.

“While two dollars per day may seem like too small a number to sufficiently feed such a large animal, we are here to tell you it is not. We in fact, like to encourage healthy and moderate eating in this facility. Our nation struggles with obesity and over-indulgence, but here we show that is not necessary for success. Thus, our Beasts thrive, and we save money which can later be used to provide better facilities for the Beasts.

Now, who would like to feed the Beast today?” Asked the Zookeeper in a theatrical voice.

Children’s hands shot in the air.

Parent’s hands shot in the air.

Elderly guests’ hands shot in the air.

Excitement swelled. The Zookeeper picked Grace and Sydney to be the lucky guests to feed the Beasts and Sydney yelled in delight, “He picked us! He picked us! I get to feed a Beast! Julie is going to be so jealous!”

Grace was delighted as well, but kept her composure as she walked forward to the Zookeeper with Sydney right behind her.

“Now, first things first, let’s get a round of applause for our very brave lovely ladies who stepped up to feed the Beast.” The crowd erupted in applause during which the Zookeeper leaned
over to Grace and whispered, “there is an extra charge of sixty dollars per person to feed the Beast. Will this be okay?”

Grace looked down at the excitement in Sydney’s eyes and nodded yes to the Zookeeper; it’s not like she could say no now.

“Alrighty then! Let the feeding begin!” Yelled the Zookeeper. “The most important part is that you are safe, so let’s go over some ground rules, alright?”

Both girls nodded yes.

“Keep your hands outside of the cage at all times. These Beasts are unpredictable. I will spray inside the cage a special spray that temporarily irritates the Beast. This will cause him to retreat towards the back. At that time I want you to throw the contents of the slop bucket inside. Got it?”

“Yep!” Responded Sydney. Grace nodded her head, still irritated about the unknown fee.

“Let’s get started then.” Said the Zookeeper handing the girls each a slop bucket of food and opening a small slit in the Jumbo Beast’s cage.

He sprayed in his concoction and the Beast whimpered loudly as it pawed at its eyes and scurried to the back of the cage. At that time, Grace and Sydney approached the small slit and threw the green mush into the cage. It splattered on the concrete ground and the crowd watched as the hungry Beast proceeded forward to lick the slop off the ground.

“We did it Auntie!” Exclaimed Sydney.

“Yeah, I hope that slop tastes better than it looks.” Responded Grace.

“Trust me, it doesn’t” Said the Zookeeper eavesdropping on their conversation and chuckling to himself.
“Alright everyone, that concludes the feeding. Hopefully our Beast has sufficiently
entertained you, but if not feel free to stop by any of our other incredibly fascinating exhibits.
Take your time and enjoy your freedom.”

The Zookeeper departed the area and left the guest to meander about by themselves.

Grace checked the time on her phone and realized it was ten past four O’clock. She
turned to Grace and said, “Hey sweetie, I told your mom I’d have you home by five. We only
have time for one more exhibit.”

“No! I wanna stay here. We still haven’t seen so much.” Cried Sydney.

“I know sweetie, but it’s getting late. I promise we can come back and see the rest of the
stuff.”

“It’s not fair.” Sydney continued her temper tantrum.

“Pick one more thing to see.” Said Grace sternly, secretly hoping to leave the Zoo soon.

“I want my picture with the Beast.” Said Sydney without a smile. She wiped a soft tear
away from her eye.

“Alright, let’s go.” Said Grace looking at the map to figure out where the picture station
was. “Look, here we are.” She said pointing to the Jumbo Beast section of the map. “And, this is
where we want to go.” The picture station was past the intake cage and slightly left. It should be
a short walk.

The girls began their journey to the next exhibit. They waved goodbye to the Jumbo
Beast, not that he’d be able to see, and they traced their steps back to near the intake cage.

As they were passing the small cage that held Beast 9001 and his cagemate, Grace’s eyes
lingered longer than before on the face of Beast 9001. She noticed his soft cheek bones and his
gentle smile that was inverted right now. She noticed a kindness in his eyes that lied under the tears that clouded his vision.

She wondered what his story was. A gentle Beast? Or a dangerous foe who is manipulating her mind.

Beasts always manipulate.

She needs to stay strong. She can’t be teaching Sydney to trust these wild Beasts.

So, she keeps walking without hesitation.

The two girls arrived at the picture taking station only ten minutes later. There was a long line extending past the doors of station filled with squirming kids and tired parents. For most, this was their last stop of the day, other than the gift shop of course where families will depart with hundreds of dollars of merchandise only to be worn once.

Sydney was getting impatient in line. She had missed her nap today, so it was expected, but for a woman with no child experience, Sydney’s tantrums were beginning to be too much for Grace.

“Do you want to just leave?” Grace asked Sydney sternly.

“No! I want a picture with the Beast. All my friends have one.” Pouted Sydney with tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Then be quiet or I’ll rip out your vocal chords, just like they do to the Beasts.”

Sydney’s eyes grew wide at this threat and her once fake tears of attention grabbing turned into real tears of fear. She wailed and the other guests looked at Grace with hurtful judgement in their eyes.

“Shhh, shhh, shhh.” She shushed to Sydney wrapping her in a tight hug. “I am so sorry. I
didn’t mean it. Plus, they don’t take the Beast’s vocal chords until after the intake period, so you’d be fine!” Grace tried to make the subject lighthearted. Sydney’s tears slowed, and Grace sighed an audible sigh of relief. She was never having kids.

Finally, after a long wait, the two tired girls reached the front of the line. With hearts pounding, they stepped up to the front desk and Grace handed over her two tickets.
Picture Day

While normally, a cage separates the Zoo guests and the Beasts for both of their safety, this exhibit breaks down all barriers and lets free people actually partake in the punishment of these Beasts!

The special Beasts chosen to be involved in the picture program are some of the most violent, dangerous, and scary individuals. They have been in the Zoo for years and will be in here for the rest of their lives.

While often, the Zoo returns Beasts that have served a certain amount of time back into society, these Beasts are so wild that it’s not safe to do so. Thus, this is their home, and this is their life.

It’s cool to watch them grow in the Zoo throughout the years because they learn so much. They are smart and they form bonds with other Beasts even creating a hierarchy of Beasts. The Zoo has to be careful, or else they will get too smart for their own good, thus they limit the amount of tools and toys they get and the amount of free time and educational programs they get to partake in.

Grace has seen activist groups protesting these Beasts’ rights on the outside. They carry picket signs and lead marches and claim that Beasts deserve fair treatments too. But these Beasts are evil, so they don’t deserve luxury, right?

No one listens to the activists, anyways.

Grace and Sydney are next to get their pictures taken. Grace hands the man working the desk both her and Sydney’s picture ticket, and they observe the row of Beasts they get to choose from for their picture.
“They look kind of dopey.” Commented Sydney to Grace.

“Maybe they are just tired, dear.” Responded Grace observing the half shut eyes of the Beasts.

“Next.” Called the photographer. “Hello you two, how’re you doing today?” He asked to Grace and Sydney nicely.

“We’re fine, thank you. Just ready to get our picture and head home for the day.” Responded Grace exhausted from the day.

“Well, I will move this along nice and quickly for you guys, but first a little safety information, alright?” Said the chipper photographer.

“Sure thing.” Said Grace.

“So, these are our long term Beasts, we call them Lifers. They are in for the most heinous crimes you could think of: killing families, harassing babies, setting fires, all that good stuff.

Some came in as young as twelve years old. Others were grown men when we caught them. But regardless of their age on intake they will all suffer the same fate: a life in this Zoo.” The photographer chuckled to himself. “It must really suck to never be able to leave here, right.”

“I wanna stay forever, but my Auntie won’t let me. She’s making me go home.” Pouted Sydney.

“By all means Syd, stay here with these evil Beasts. I’m sure they can clear up a cage for you, right?” She said addressing the photographer.

“I’ve actually heard that with more and more Beasts being captured everyday, we are at full capacity. In fact we reached full capacity six months ago, but they keep sticking these Beasts places.”
Grace glared at the photographer.

“Oh, but yes, of course. We could most likely clear you a cell by tonight.” He said covering his tracks.

“I know you’re joking. I’m not evil, and I’m not a monster. But I do want to come back.”

Said Sydney.

Grace and the photographer chuckled softly.

“Alright sweetie, I promise we can come back.” Said Grace.

The truth was she wanted to come back as well. She needed to know what was going to happen to Beast 9001. She didn’t know why, but she just felt in her bones that he didn’t deserve to be here.

“So, back to the rules, girls.” Said the photographer noticing the growing line of guests. “These Beasts are beyond reform, but yet we are letting you stand right next to them for a picture. You can touch them, but if one growls or bears his teeth, I want you to run behind this yellow line,” he said pointing to a line of paint below him “and a Zookeeper will intervene to protect you from the Beast.”

“What will the Zookeeper do?” Asked Sydney.

“Well, human’s lives come before those of the Beasts, so in severe cases we might need to shoot the Beast down. While it’s a shame to lose one of our own Beasts, it is ultimately a matter of the importance of their lives versus one of our own life. But, don’t you worry. We give our Beasts a slight sedative to ensure they don’t lash out on you.”

“They look like zombies.” Said Grace with a look of disgust on her face. “How much sedative did you give them?”
She looked at each of the six faces of the Beasts and noticed the dark circles that sat underneath their eyes. She noticed their emaciated figures and their thinning skin and hair. And, she noticed how slowly the Beasts moved, (when they were permitted to move, that is.)

“We actually, only give them a low dose sedative prescribed by our Zoo doctor. It’s totally safe for our Beasts. Now, you take one of the Black Beasts or Polar Beasts in for a picture, you’re gunna have to give them a boat load of this sedative.” The Photographer laughed a deep laugh straight from his belly.

“But these Lifers, most don’t have any fight left in them. See, it’s smart how the Zoo works this program. They know at intake, Beasts are crazy and wild and full of spirit. They thrash around and fight everything and everyone. But, after years in the Zoo, they finally calm down. The Beasts learn that if they behave, life is better for them. You know, it’s like we are actually doing these Beasts a service by training them. We teach them to be silent and compliant. Good skills to have.

So yeah, if you see a Beast walking around like a zombie, he’s probably a Lifer. It can be hard I imagine never being able to return to the outside of this Zoo, but they have got to also realize what a great place this is, and how we are actually helping them.

Sometimes, they become really zombie like and kill themselves! Granted, they don’t come back to life, but who knows, maybe their spirits haunt this place!” The photographer wiggled his fingers up and down while making quiet ghost noises.

“Maybe, if you’re lucky, one of the Beasts will kill himself while you’re here. What a treat that would be. Some people are evil and become Beasts. We as a society can only do so
much to help them! If they chose a path of death, that is their own doing. We do not condone it, but we also don’t do a lot to stop it.

Now, please step right this way for your picture. Did you select a Beast?” Finished the long winded Photographer.

Grace felt the color slip from her cheeks after hearing the crude photographer’s flippant attitude towards these Beasts’ lives. Yes they are Beasts, but they still deserve some respect, right? I mean, after all, her cat gets better care than half these men.

Sydney’s face still retained its color and she looked around eagerly at the six Beasts to choose from. Each stood by a plaque detailing their life story and crime.

The first Beast had grey hair that was receding quickly from his head. He was short in stature, which wasn’t helped by his slumped shoulders. He was a baby killer: one of the worst Beasts known to man. Baby killers were hated among free citizens, but also among the Beasts within these walls. This particular baby killer had scars all across his face: battle wounds if you will.

Sydney thought his face looked tough, but she wanted someone who would impress all her classmates, and this man was simply too short.

Moving on to the second Beast in the row, Sydney was unimpressed. This Beast looked like a normal man, except he was captured for setting fire to a building for insurance money. Two people got killed in the process. Next.

The third Beast in line caught Sydney’s eyes and brought a smile to her face. This was him. This is who she wanted in her pictures. He was young looking, and despite the muscle that had atrophied off his body, he still looked strong.
He had dark black hair and the strongest jaw line she had ever seen! His eyes were black and pierced deeply into anyone who looked at them, despite his drugged up state.

This man was special because he claims to have nothing to do with his crime. He claims to have been framed, but those dark eyes tell of danger, and Beasts are known to lie.

This Beast, Beast 5097 was a serial killer and a priest. He was captured one Sunday morning right after a church service he was giving. He had apparently been taking alter boys home with him and chopping up their bodies. How cruel.

According to the plaque, six alter boys had gone missing in a span of two years. While they never found any evidence linking the priest to the crime, officials deemed that it made logical sense that he would be involved.

Beast 5097 claims he has alibis for each killing, but officials took his vocal chords preemptively (normally they are only taken after intake, but he was resisting officials), thus he could never tell of those alibis.


Beast 5097 was lead over to a designated “X” on the ground next to Grace and Sydney and the photographer took a tin can filled with rocks and shook it above his head to get the Beast’s attention.

“Look over here, Beastie.” The photographer said. Sydney placed her arm around the Beast and made a snarling face. Grace tried to smile.

“On the count of three say Freedom! One, two, three.” The photographer snapped multiple pictures and handed Grace and Sydney a small ticket which they could redeem for their photos at the next station.
“Thanks so much ladies.” He said as the two girls walked away.

Grace and Sydney handed over their picture ticket and were presented with three beautiful eight by five images of them and the Beast with the Zoo logo in the corner.

“That’ll be twelve fifty for each print.” Said the woman at the counter.

Grace sighed and handed the cashier three twenty dollar bills: the last bills in her wallet.

“Man, it’s like you’ve gotta be rich to come to the Zoo these days.” Grace said quietly to herself. “Come on, sweetie” she said as she grabbed the pictures and lead Sydney out of the Zoo.

The pair walked quietly to their car and departed the Zoo. Sydney fell fast asleep in the car, exhausted from the day’s excitement.

Grace was wide awake in the driver’s seat.
The Aftermath

After dropping Sydney back home to her mom, Grace was able to return to her normal childless life. She returned home late that night to her quiet house and she poured herself a deep glass of wine before reclining on her sofa to watch some TV before bed.

She began flipping through channels when a story on the news caught her eye. It was the story of Beast 9001’s intake to the Zoo early today. It detailed his crimes and applauded the work of the Zookeepers.

Grace turned the TV off.

She tried reading a book to get her mind off the Zoo, but her attention kept drifting to the Beasts she saw today. She thought not only of Beast 9001, but all the Beasts that had come before him. Why hadn’t she seen how cruel this place treated its inhabitants when she was younger?

She thought how many of these Beasts would never taste wine again, or hold their children. She thought about how their lives that been reduced down to one bad decision. What if she made one bad decision. Could she survive in the Zoo eating green slop and sharing a bathroom sized cage with three other Beasts?

She finished her glass of wine and tucked herself into bed determined to forget her racing thoughts. But, she couldn’t escape. She was prisoner to her own mind.

That night, and for the next six nights she dreamt of Beast 9001. However, she didn’t just dream of him in Beast form. She dreamt of him as a young man: a handsome young man.

She dreamed of him touching her hand delicately and telling her his life story. She dreamed about the struggles that he has lived through and the moments that lead up to his crime.
She dreamed about the fear he must have felt when he was captured, and she dreamed about him being released.

She couldn’t get this man out of her mind, but why. He was just a Beast afterall. A criminal. An exhibit. But, she had to find out if there was more to him.

“Hey, sis! How are you?” She said the following Saturday to her sister on the telephone.

“Great! I got that big grant I was working on at work. Thank you so much for taking Sydney last weekend, I wouldn’t have been able to do it without you!” She replied.

“It was honestly no problem at all, I actually had a great time and Sydney was a delight. I was calling to see if she might actually want to go again with me?” Said Grace hesitantly.

“Again? So soon?” Grace’s sister chuckled. “Are you sure you’re not the one who wants to go?”

Grace blushed over the phone, but quickly recovered saying, “Ha, no. I mean, I wouldn’t mind, I just felt bad that Syd and I didn’t get to see all the exhibits the last time.”

“Well,” said Grace’s sister. “I know she had a great time and would love to go again, but she’s actually at our neighbor’s house for the day having a playdate. Rain check?”

“Sure thing. Not a problem.” Responded Grace while biting her nails: a bad habit she picked up as a kid. “I love you, let’s talk soon.” She hung up the phone.

Grace felt weird going to the Zoo alone as a grown adult. It was a place for kids and families. But, she feared if she waited too long, Beast 9001 would be taken from intake and placed in a community cage with his vocal chords removed and all chances of getting to know him gone.
She decided she would go to the Zoo alone. She was sure no one would even bat an eye at her. People must do this all the time. She would go at ten o’clock and leave there by three in the afternoon. She would not spend the whole day there alone. She would be in and out once she confirmed Beast 9001’s wrongdoings.

Grace packed up her purse and left the house promptly at ten o’clock. She drove quickly to the Zoo and hyped herself up for entering alone.

You’re a grown woman at the Zoo. That is not strange, all ages can enjoy the Zoo. You are only going in to see if your hunch about Beast 9001 is right, it’s not like you’re here alone because you don’t have friends. You just have a plan and need to do it today. Let’s go. She thought to herself.

She walked briskly into the daunting infrastructure from the parking lot and began the whole admissions process once again.

The wait was tedious and unnecessary taking well over an hour and a half. The hoops she jumped through were difficult without the support of someone else, but she managed to make her way to the ticket booth where she handed over more cash to the cashier that just keeps taking.

Once she was finally within the facilities, she chooses to make her way to the intake cage from the opposite direction she and Sydney came. That way, she could simply look at the other exhibits she missed. She wasn’t going to stop at them, but this way she could see them. She had to go through the Zoo regardless to get to the intake cage, so might as well see new things, right?

Before she even began her walk to see Beast 9001, she witnessed a fierce fight in one of the cages right off the entrance to the Zoo. This cage held three massive Beasts, but was so small none of them could so much as turn around.
Three Zookeepers walked slowly over to the cages when they noticed this fight unveiling. They explained that fights are an exciting part of the zoo. “If you’re lucky you will see one happen naturally, like this. If not we will do a little prodding” the Zookeeper said as he poked around in the cage with the blunt end of his whip, “so you still get your money’s worth.”

A crowd began to form around the cage. Inside, one Beast had brutally beaten another who was currently curled in the fetal position on the ground with blood coming from his mouth.

The remaining two Beasts snarled and growled at one another, but were rendered motionless when one of the Zookeepers pulled out a device that looked like a TV remote. He pressed the red button at the top and delivered an electric shock to each of the Beasts in turn.

The crowd cheered as each Beast seized up and fell to the ground.

The Zookeeper sent a shock through the beaten Beast as well just for good measures. His body flailed on the ground and the crowd of children and parents once again cheered for the Zookeeper and the fried Beasts.

Grace felt a tinge in her stomach as the scent of fried flesh reached her nose. She looked around at the smiles on the faces of the children that grotesquely mocked the cringes on the faces of the Beasts.

She felt her heart as it raced and pounded inside her chest. These were once men whom we valued in society. Now, they are sacks of flesh manipulated for our entertainment. Grace casted her eyes downward and proceeded on the wide sidewalk towards the intake cage.

She listened once again to the sounds of the Zoo and instead of hearing the powerful roars and war cries of the Beasts, she heard the screams of agony and distress. She heard the calls out for help and the laments at their situations.
She listened harder and heard the soft cries of female Beasts once drowned out by the males. She didn’t even realize women became Beasts. She never fathomed that she herself could become a Beast.

She tried to push the sounds out from her mind, but in their place came the overwhelming stench of filth that exuded from the cages: these Beasts’ homes.

She smelled feces and urine mixed with blood and sweat from the fights and immense June heat. Would no one clean these Beast’s homes for them? Do they not deserve sanitation? Perhaps that’s why six Beast die every month due to infection. Grace had done her research the night before.

Infection kills six a month. Fights kill four. Lack of medical aid kills two. Malnutrition kills twelve. Zookeeper brutality kills eight. The list goes on and on. No wonder the Zoo Riders fight to close down this place. It’s a death trap.

Grace needed to get inmate 9001 out, before it was too late.
The Petting Zoo

On her way to the intake cage, Grace got lost.

She thought she knew the layout of the Zoo, but it is labyrinth like and she got turned around. She proceeded down this narrow path of cobbed road and saw a sign for the petting zoo.

*Pet our smallest baby Beasts today! We promise they won’t bite.*

Read a large sign hanging over an enclosed exhibit.

Grace proceeded towards this exhibit in hopes of finding a Zookeeper who could lead her to the intake cages. She walked through the large steel doors to the exhibit and found a room with beige walls and mats covering the ground inside. Sitting on the plush mats were baby Beasts of all shapes and sizes.

She immediately saw a little female Beast just a few years older than sweet Sydney. This baby Beast’s eyes had black stripes around them like a raccoon and her hair was in a tangled mess. Didn’t she have a mother to look after her?

Grace stared at her and thought about her innocent niece. Sydney would never survive in a place like this. But then again, she would never do anything so evil as to end up here, would she? She has family who cares about her and loves her. She’s not a bad kid.

But, what if this baby Beast’s parent thought she was a good kid too? And now she lives in a petting zoo. What could such a young innocent thing to to end up here.

Grace’s heart began to pound as she reached down to stroke the baby Beast’s rough hair. The baby Beast nuzzled up to her welcoming the loving touch and Grace felt her maternal instincts kick into gear.
She longed to take this baby Beast home with her and clean her up. She longed to forgive her for her bad choices and help her make good ones. She longed to give her the love she needs.

A Zookeeper saw Grace’s interaction with this baby Beast and walked confidently up to them. He said with a loud voice, “Hello there, I am Tran a Zookeeper here. How’re you doing today? Is this your first visit to the petting zoo?”

“Well, it’s my first visit in awhile. I came here as a little girl, but so much has changed.” Replied Grace.

“Yes, we actually get that a lot. The Zoo is in a constant state of change, but if you look at the root of it, you will see that we truly haven’t changed that much. I remember coming here as a little boy as well, and believe it or not, I actually remember some of the Beasts that are still here today!

Granted, they are slightly greyer and their bodies have aged significantly, but I still recognize them by their plaques. It’s crazy to think that one day, my kids will see the same ferocious Beasts I saw as a boy!”

“Yeah, it’s crazy.” Responded Grace looking down at the baby Beast whose head was nuzzled in her lap.

“The Petting Zoo is great because most of our Beasts are too unpredictable to let the public touch. Touch is in fact outlawed on this premise except for under extraordinary circumstances. That’s why you see all of the Zookeepers carrying whips, grippers attached to long poles, and gloves. These tools allow us to touch the Beasts, but from a safe distance.”

“She likes being touched though. I think it’s calming her down.” Said Grace feeling agitated by the Zookeeper’s narrow mindedness.
“Aw, yes. But we can’t simply do things just because the Beasts like them. We have to think about what’s best for everybody involved. While the Baby Beasts are a different story, the adult Beasts simply lost the right to touch when they committed their crimes. Love and support are privileges that sadly, these Beasts have demonstrated they do not want. You cannot act out in violence and deviance and expect love in return. What would that teach them?

But, it’s not like they’re suffering. They get enough attention from the Zoo guests. Just imagine if hundreds of people flocked from around the state every single day, just to see you! Can you imagine how special you would feel?”

The Zookeeper reached down to stroke the Baby Beast’s head, and she began snarling and snapping at his hand. He flicked her nose and said, “Bad girl. Don’t bite the hand that feeds you.” He looked up at Grace with a stoic face and said, “Selfish bitch. Even if she is released, she’ll be back. Mark my words. My children will see her.”

“Um, could I ask something?” Said Grace tentatively.

“Go right ahead.” Responded the Zookeeper.

“What exactly did she do? I mean, she’s so little.”

The Zookeeper reached towards the Baby Beast’s neck and grasped the small collar that was tied tightly around her. On it, her number Beast 8709 was written. “Each of the Baby Beasts wear an identifying necklace which tells of their identification number. Follow me.” Said the Zookeeper standing straight up and walking to a wall in the back of the room.

Grace lifted the Baby Beast’s head from her lap and stood as well. She followed the Zookeeper to the back of the room cautiously as the eyes of thirty Baby Beasts followed her every move.
“So, this is the wall of Baby Beasts.” Said the Tran gesturing to a wall of narratives depicting the lives of each Baby Beast. Next to each narrative was a picture of the Beast upon intake and their identification number. “Let’s try to find Beast 8709, shall we?” He said to Grace.

They both scanned the wall until they stumbled upon a narrative twice the size of the others belonging to Beast 8709.

“Ah, yes.” Said Tran. “Now, I remember this little tyrant. Her crime was a doozy.

Grace began reading the narrative:

Beast 8709, captured on December 24th, 2017. On the night before Christmas and all through the house, not a Beast was stirring, except for young Straus.

Melanie Straus, now known as Beast 8709 was found at the scene of a heinous murder the night before Christmas three blocks from her house. Beast 8709 and friends, all aged fourteen at the time, decided to partake in a night of shenanigans that ended in the death of an eighty year old neighbor.

Grace thought that the Baby Beast looked so much younger than fourteen. Perhaps she had been neglected at home. Grace had seen other kids at volunteer programs she works for who didn’t have enough to eat, and she knows how it can stunt a child’s growth.

Beast 8709 stole her mother’s car and drove while under the influence of beer three blocks past her house. The car was filled with dozens of eggs and multiple roles of toilet paper intended for vandalism.

After losing control of the vehicle on the snowy night, Beast 8709 crashed into the side of neighbor Dorothy May’s home. Dorothy May was asleep at the time, and was killed directly on contact with the vehicle.
The two other friends in Beast 8709’s car died as well.

Beast 8709 was charged with a triple homicide and will remain in the Zoo for five decades for each death she was responsible for.

Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good night. Beast 8709 certainly gave us all a fright.

“That’s terrible, she’s so young. She’ll be here forever.” Responded Grace after reading the narrative. “She didn’t even mean to kill those people.”

“Ah, but intent and impact are two very different things, now aren’t they.” Replied Tran.

“And, she was old enough to know that drinking and driving, and vandalism were against the law. Our mission is justice for all. Thus, we took the little thing in, and she will live out her days here where she can teach the other children what happens when you make a mistake.”

“And the other Baby Beasts? Will they get returned ever?” Grace asked.

“Some will, yes! We believe in rehabilitating our Beasts and sending them forth to be good members of the free world. But, we find they truly do enjoy our facilities here and most return within the year.

Now, is there anything else I can help you with today, ma’am?” Said Tran wrapping up the conversation.

“No, I think I’m actually alright. I’m going to hang out here a little more, then find my way to the intake cage.”

“Well, make sure you stop at the Worker Beasts exhibit on your way there! It’s a fun one! And thank you, on behalf of all the staff here, for supporting our Zoo.” Tran tipped his hat towards Grace and walked out of the Petting Zoo.
Grace was left alone. The eyes of thirty Baby Beasts were still transfixed on her.

She needed to leave this building.

But, her feet felt as if they were cemented to the floor.

She watched as a group of children entered the Petting Zoo with their families. They were joking around with each other and frolicking about gazing at all the Baby Beasts who looked uncannily like themselves.

“I wanna pet that one!” Screamed one child pointing to Beast 8709.

Beast 8709 scurried behind Grace’s legs seeking her for protection.

The rambunctious children played roughly with the Beasts, who in their minds were only there for their personal amusement.

Grace took a deep breath and walked out of the Petting Zoo through the two large doors. She didn’t have the heart to look back at the sad eyes of the Baby Beasts who she knew were following her.

She didn’t stop walking even when she heard the tender cry of Beast 8709 call out to her.

She needed to find the intake cage.

The Zookeeper said the Worker Beasts were on the way to the intake cage, so she followed the brightly painted sign with a large arrow pointing to the Worker Beast exhibit.

She steadied her breath while walking, synchronizing her inhales and exhales with each step she took. She felt her heart rate slow down and clarity once again reached her mind. She was here for Beast 9001.

Beast 8709 would be okay.

Beast 8709 had to be okay.
Right now, Grace’s only concern was getting out of this place as soon as possible so she could hold Sydney tight and never let go.
Worker Beasts

Grace walked for what seemed like thirty minutes before she reached another sign saying: Worker Beasts located here: Come in and join the gang.

This exhibit used to be only observed through a glass window pane when Grace was a child. You were allowed to observe the chains of worker Beasts dig holes and build up walls of brick, only to have the next group fill the holes and tear down the walls.

One could become entranced by the hypnotic movement of the worker Beasts constantly watched over by the Queen Beast: a Beast who exhibited good behavior and was promoted to watching over the others.

Now, guests could buy tickets that let you dress up in grey jumpsuits and fake shackles that connect you by the hands and feet to other guests. Together you get to build up your own brick wall just like the Beasts.

They claim that you get to work alongside the real Worker Beasts, but are completely protected by the glass that stands in between your groups.

How fun, we are putting our children to work just so the Zoo can turn a profit, thought Grace. She’s glad she was never allowed to do this as a kid.

The kids who partook in the activity, however, were ecstatic. Their smiles beamed as their mother’s snapped pictures to put in the yearly Christmas card. Little boys and girls stood shackled together creating a wall that will soon get destroyed.

There laughter mirrored the Beast’s grunts.

Their elation stood in stark contrast with the Beast’s sweat and blood that ran down their bodies.
And, their street clothes partially covered by the Zoo issued jumpsuits mocked the bare backs of the Beasts whose only possessions were those jumpsuits.

The children worked away building their wall while the Beasts worked in the background.

“Why don’t the Beasts ever stop working?” Ask one child to his mother.

A Zookeeper who was nearby overheard this question, and said “because, little boy, they know we’ll do this!” He took his whip from its holster and slashed it against the glass window. The Beasts were caught off guard and jumped at the sound of the lash.

“It’s scary from out here, but it’s even more scary if we go inside their cage.” The Zookeeper said while stifling a chuckle.

“Whoa.” The kids gazed in amazement at the Zookeeper.

“How long can they work for?” Asked another child in the crowd.

“As long as we tell them too! Beasts have a great work ethic, it’s inspiring.” Said the Zookeeper. “We like to keep them working most of the day, we find they behave better if they are tired. Some can go as long as twelve hours in one shift!”

The kids “ooohed” in unison.

Inside the glass cage, the Worker Beasts created harmonies with their muffled voices. They used grunts and throat noises to create a symphony of sounds that blended together into something beautiful.

Grace noted that there was a surprising amount of beauty in their work and their song. In this whole Zoo exists a lot of beauty, but it’s hidden by horrendous conditions.
Grace needed to keep moving if she was going to reach the intake cage in time to speak to Beast 9001.

“Hi, Mr. Zookeeper?” She said to the Zookeeper on duty. “I was wondering if you could point me in the direction of the intake cage?”

“Ah, great choice of exhibits ma’am.” He replied. “It’s one of my favorites! I love hearing the Beasts talk before they lose their vocal chords, they say the damnedest things.” He chuckled to himself.

“So, which direction is it?” Grace prodded.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I’m a little spacey today! It’s just around this corner and to your left!” He said pointing Grace down a nearby path.

“Thanks so much.” Grace replied.

“No problem. Tell the fellas I say hi!” He waved as Grace left.

*What a nutjob.* Grace mumbled under her breath.

She proceeded away from the Worker Beasts and down another cobbled path covered by artificial trees.

This part of the Zoo was significantly quieter than the other parts. Grace could no longer hear the screeches and yelps of the Beasts, but instead was met with an eerie silence. She embraced the silence, not experiencing much of it throughout the day.

Grace listened to the thump her feet made as she walked on the cobble, and she listened to the steady rhythm of her breath as it flowed in and out of her lungs. She was thankful for her freedom.
After contemplating her privilege, Grace looked up and saw the sign she had been searching for all day: *Intake Cages: to the right.*

She was here.

She was ready for whatever she was about to hear.

She approached the small cages which were made for only one Beast per unit, but now which held two to three. She scanned the rows of newly captured Beasts and her palms began to sweat at the thought of not finding Beast 9001.

*What if they already took his vocal chords?*

*What if they needed space so they cut his intake short?*

*What if he is already assigned to an exhibit?*

*Shit. She should just go home.*

*What is she even doing here? What does she think he is going to tell her.*

Her thoughts raced, until her eyes fell upon the last cage in the very back. Inside she caught a glimpse of the soulful eyes that once caught her attention.

She quickly ran to the cage and saw Beast 9001 sitting perched in the back corner looking dazed and weary.

“You….came….back.” He said slowly and painfully. Each word he spoke caused him to gasp, exhausted for air. His eyes drooped low and he had to fight to stay awake. Constant light and interruptions causes intense sleep deprivation. He already looked like a zombie.

“You remembered me. I didn’t think you would. There were so many people.” Grace said frantically to Beast 9001. She refused to take her eyes off him.
“I could tell you were the only one who cared. No shit I remembered you.” He spoke quietly.

Grace laughed. Of course he remembered her. It was all fate. She was meant to be here.

“Look.” she said to the Beast as she reached into her purse. “I snuck you some food in. I had to hide it in my blouse to get it in here, but I thought you might be hungry.”

“Starving.” He replied.

Grace looked anxiously around to ensure no Zookeepers or Zoo guests were near, but Beast 9001’s cage was located fairly far back and thus was isolated from guests.

“The Zookeepers don’t come back for two hours.” Whispered beast 9001.

Grace slipped a ham and cheese sandwich through the bars of the cage.

Beast 9001 grabbed her hand.

Grace flinched, but relaxed when she saw the Beast was simply reaching for a human touch. Grace reached into the cage with her free hand and placed it on top of his. She squeezed him and felt the bones of his hand beneath hers. Tears began to form in her eyes but she forced them back.

He released his hand and took the sandwich gratefully. He offered her half, and when she declined, he engulfed the food in two bites. Grace reached into her purse and pulled out a bottle of water.

“It’s not cold anymore, but I didn’t know if they gave you anything to drink.” Grace said gingerly.

“They do, but it’s disgusting.” He said looking down at a half filled water bowl in the corner of his cage. A dozen dead flies were floating on the top.
Beast 9001 guzzled down the water and handed the empty bottle back to Grace to dispose of. “Thank you. Sincerely.” He said looking more alive than he did ten minutes ago. “Why did you come back?” He asked.

“I needed to know you. I couldn’t get you out of my mind.” Grace mumbled.

“Likewise.” Beast 9001 replied. “I thought about you every night.”

“Really? I did too.” Grace said gazing into Beast 9001’s emerald eyes. She felt connected to this man in a way she had never felt before. But he was a Beast. He was Beast 9001.

“What is your name? I need to know that first.” Grace said hastily.

“Jack Bammer.” He replied. “Or you can call me Beast 9001 now.” He chuckled dryly.

“I would prefer not to.” Replied Grace reaching her hand back through the cage bars.

“Alright. What is yours?” He said grabbing her hand.

“Grace.”

“Nice to meet you, Grace.”

“Yeah. I wish it was under different circumstances though.”

“That’d be nice. So why’d you really come back?”

“I told you, I couldn’t get you out of my mind.”

“So, you wanted to see me? Then what?” Jack said dryly.

“I don’t know.” Replied Grace realizing her plan wasn’t fully thought through.

“I don’t want to be a show the rest of my life.”

“I don’t think of you as a show. I just needed to know, I guess, if the story that Zookeeper told was true.”

“I’m not a criminal.”
“Then why are you here?”

“I did everything for my family.”

“Just tell me the truth, please.” Begged Grace.

“I got laid off from my job six months ago. I have two kids and a dead wife. She died in childbirth, so our youngest never even knew her. We were doing fine money wise up until this year, but it’s not like we had a big savings or anything.

So, when I got laid off, the money ran out pretty fast. Both my boys started working little jobs just to help make ends meet, but I couldn’t keep up with the bills and we got evicted.”

“I’m so sorry.” Interrupted Grace.

“I don’t want pity.” Said Jack. “We hustled as much as we could, but without a home and without an income, things got pretty dark. We found a shelter and spent a few nights there, and I really was trying to find a job, but no where was hiring.

One day, my oldest boy came home with a diamond tennis bracelet. I asked him where he got it and he said he found it on the ground. I don’t raise no liar, and I don’t raise no criminal, so I asked him again where he got this bracelet. He said, he was walking home from school and he found it lying on the ground outside a jeweler’s shop.

He said he knew he should’ve returned it, but he knew how much money it could be worth too. So, he picked it up and brought it home.

I stared at that bracelet all night. I thought about taking it back to the jewelry shop where I know it came from. Maybe they could find its owners who dropped it. Then I thought about how I could pawn it and feed my boys. They are teenagers and I know they must always be
hungry, but they never tell me directly. We get fed dinner at the shelter, which is great, but they need more.

I try to only eat half of my food, so I could give them the rest, but I got so hungry myself. That bracelet could buy groceries, and maybe a new start. We just needed a break.

So, I took the bracelet to the pawn shop the next day and tried to sell it. That’s where I was handcuffed and captured.

Apparently, the diamond shop had been burglarized the day before.

The thief stole hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of jewelry, part of which was this diamond bracelet. The men who captured me told me I was under capture for robbery and intent to sell. I would face a minimum of five decades in the Zoo for my crimes.

I told them my son found the bracelet, and I simply needed money for my family, but they just laughed in my face. They told me they don’t trust homeless druggies, and that I wasn’t fooling anyone.

I haven’t been able to see my boys since that day.

I have no idea if they’re okay.

I didn’t rob the store.

I didn’t technically steal the bracelet.

I agree it was wrong, but I can’t spend the rest of my life in here. I was just trying to provide for my family.

Please, don’t think of me as a monster. If the circumstances were different, I never would have stooped so low.” Jack concluded.

“I knew it.” Said Grace with tears welling in her eyes.
“You knew what?”

“That you weren’t bad.”

“I’m not good.”

“Well, I can tell you’re more good than bad. How about that.” Said Grace.

“I could agree with that.” Smiled Jack. “It’s pretty crazy, right.”

“What’s crazy?”

“This place.” Said Jack. “And, the idea that one decision can completely change the rest of your life.”

“Yeah. Did you ever come to the Zoo as a kid?”

“All the time, and I loved it. Until I understood it.”

“Yeah, I get that.” Responded Grace thinking about how differently she sees the Zoo now.

“Hey, just so you know, I’m innocent too.” Said a man sitting behind Jack.

Grace jumped back startled by this man. She had completely forgotten Jack had a cellmate and felt so ashamed that she never even introduced herself.

“I am so sorry, I was so focused on Jack. I’m Grace.” She said to the man extending her hand to shake his.

“It’s fine. I should probably get use to being ignored in here. You two finish up, I’ll be back here.”

He crawled to the corner of the cage and laid down. He closed his eyes and while Grace suspected he was faking sleeping, she still appreciated the idea of a private conversation.

“So what now, Jack?” She asked.
“I don’t really have any options, do I?” He said.

“I guess not. I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“Can we meet again?” Asked Grace.

“You know where I’ll be.” He said sarcastically. “Just try to come once more before they take my vocals. I’m really dreading that.”

“I promise.” Said Grace
Big Game Hunting Safari

Grace slowly turned her back to the intake cage and began walking away for what could be the last time. She began walking towards the exit of the Zoo, unsure of what her next step was.

Shaken up from her talk with Beast 9001, and wanting out of the Zoo as fast as possible, she reached into her purse to find her keys. Digging around in her bag, she realized she still had two tickets for the Big Game Hunting Safari she intended to take Sydney to last week.

She didn’t want to go on the Safari, but she also couldn’t leave the Zoo just yet. Her mind was racing from the information Beast 9001 had given her and she needed a moment to clear her head.

She wanted to take action against this place, but what if that wasn’t the right call. What if she is being manipulated by the Beasts? What if she is fabricating these thoughts in her mind, but they don’t actually exist. What if the Zoo is good? What if the Zoo is bad?

She began walking towards the ticket counter for the Safari and took her place at the end of the line. More waiting, great.

She thought, *I’ll go on the safari, and by the end, I will make a choice. It will be my choice. I just need a little more time to think.*

So, she waited patiently for the line to gradually lessen. She felt sweat saturate her shirt by the time she reached the front of the line, and she welcomed the cool breeze that brushed through the air.
Finally, she had reached the front of the line and was escorted to a large Jeep like vehicle with another family. She seated herself in the vehicle and waited patiently as the safari guide explained his spiel.

“Good afternoon Zoo-goers. I hope your day has been filled with fun and excitement.” He looked to the vehicle of people.

The family in the front of the Jeep yelled with excitement. Grace was quiet.

“So, I’m going to explain some rules real quickly to you, then we are going to go off on an adventure and hopefully find some wild Beasts for you all to hunt today. Raise your hand if you’re ready!” The Safari guide exclaimed.

The family of four shot their hands in the air before Grace even had time to think. Reflexively, Grace also raised her hand, and with that the Safari was underway.

“Alright, so I want everyone to keep all hands, legs, noses, and ears inside the vehicle at all times.” The children laughed nervously at the Safari guide. “We will be moving fast, so I want everyone to reach up and fasten your seatbelts.”

The family and Grace complied.

“Now, I am giving you each a handgun loaded with one bullet! These handguns have their safety on, but when the time comes, if you see a Beast and want to shoot, I want you to yell ‘Mine!’ so we know you are shooting. Then I want you to take the safety off and aim at the Beast. You only get one shot, so make it count! Got it?” He said.

“We got it.” Exclaimed the little girl in the front row reaching for her handgun. Her parents helped position her hands so she was ready to shoot when the time came.
“And one more thing. There will be decoys out in the field. Don’t shoot the Zookeepers or the civilians or else you lose!” He chuckled to himself.

“Are they real people?” Grace found herself suddenly asking.

The Safari guide laughed out loud and exclaimed, “of course not! We wouldn’t kill real people. The decoys are only cardboard cutouts, but they pop out of nowhere so they can be tricky. The only living things are the Beasts we are hunting down. And remember, these are bad bad Beasts, we only execute the very worst.

Now let’s get this safari going! Join me in helping pull the trigger on our scariest monsters, because I need your help to make our world safe again.” He exclaimed as he handed out the rest of the handguns and floured the vehicle.

Grace flew back in her seat and gripped tightly onto the gun that was placed in her lap. She’s never held a gun before.

They began zooming through an artificially created outback with sand and watering holes and trees that mimicked the real thing.

“On your left you will see a rare Lifer Beast hiding behind that tree. This Beast was brought in for selling large quantities of marijuana across state lines. He was one of the most sought after Beasts by the Zookeepers for over a year. He operated a drug business estimated at three billion dollars.

Go ahead, take your shot, or wait for the next Beast.” Said the Safari guide.

The little boy in the front seat called out, “Mine!” And his parents helped him remove the safety from his handgun. He held the gun out towards the Beast and aimed as best he could. He pulled the trigger, and…
BAM!
He hit a tree twelve feet from the Beast.
Better luck next time.
The children rarely have good aim.
“I wanna try again!” Whined the little boy with tears welling in his face.
“We only get one shot, sweetie.” Comforted the mother.
“I want to try too!” Chimed the little girl.
“Why don’t we save your shot for a Beast that’s closer to us.” Suggested the father.
“Fine.” Pouted the little girl.
The Beast remained hidden behind his tree most likely shaking from the quasi near death
encounter. The Jeep drove off.
“Alright, little boy. That was a mighty good try. He just nearly escaped. But, moving on,
you will see a special female Beast frolicking along our vehicle. Most groups never see a female
Beast on these safaris because of how rare they are in comparison to the males, but you must
bring luck with you.

Now, this Beast was captured for murdering her husband. She claimed self defense, but
the man was sleeping. Crazy woman. She had bruising on her face the day she was captured. It is
speculated she went out drinking the night before and fell. Either way, this murderer must go.
Any takers?” The Safari Guide looked at the family sitting up front.

In unison the mother and daughter said, “Mine!”
“You go first, sweetie.” The kind mother offered and she took the safety off her daughters gun. The daughter squealed with delight and aimed her gun at the pretty Beast who was running now in a zig zag pattern.

She pulled the trigger and…

BOOM.

Another miss, although arguably closer than before.

More pouting ensued. “That wasn’t fair. She was running.” Said the little girl.

“It’s mommy’s turn. Let’s see if she can hit it.” Said the father.

The mother took aim and patiently waited until the Beast was in the prime spot. She shot, and just like the fate of her children, missed.

“Shoot, I really thought I had it.” She muttered under her breath. “We have to come back here next week, I know we’re better aims than that.”

“Okay, now it’s personal. Let me try.” Said the father.

“Remember to call it.” Reminded the Safari Guide.

“Yeah, yeah. Mine.” Said the father narrowing his gaze and preparing his gun.

He aimed. He pulled the trigger. And…

Contact!

He hit the Beast’s foot. She stopped running as the family cheered. They looked at Grace to finish the failed execution.

“One shot and you can be our winner. Look, the Beast can’t even move.” Said the Safari Guide to Grace.

Grace watched the helpless Beast as she lay bleeding and grabbing at her foot.
“I don’t want this one. It’s too easy.” Said Grace stoically.

“I respect a woman who wants to play the game. Let’s find you a Beast.” Said the Safari Guide. He drove off leaving the injured Beast to fend for herself.

Grace kept her eyes locked on the woman Beast until the vehicle had driven too far to see anymore. The Beast turned into an invisible memory.

The Safari guide drove the family and Grace around for the remaining thirty minutes of the safari continually pointing out Beasts as they appeared and telling the group their stories.

The crimes were horrendous, but the Beasts looked so innocent. Their eyes looked sad and scared and Grace couldn’t bring herself to shoot.

“Alrighty, well, we are approaching the end of the Safari and so far we have four misses and one bullet remaining. There is normally a Beast or two hiding in this long stretch before we reach the end, so I recommend shooting at the first one you see, ma’am. You ready?” Said the Safari Guide to Grace.

She didn’t move her head. She simply stared straight into her guide’s eyes.

“Looks like she is focused and ready to go everyone. Let’s all keep our eyes open for the young lady in the back.” He winked at Grace and revved the engine. He sped off forcing Grace into the back of her seat. The children in the front giggled profusely. Grace did not laugh.

Grace felt a heat rise in her body.

She thought of the barbed wire that surrounded the Zoo instilling fear in the Beasts minds. They will never leave.

She thought of the putrid smells of feces and urine that rose from the cages these Beasts sleep in.
She thought of the green slop they eat. She thought about her artisan cheeses and jam that she threw away last week because it tasted cheap.

She thought of Beast 9001 and his innocence.

She thought of the Baby Beasts and how they just need love.

She thought about the whips the Zookeepers use to maintain power.

She thought about the laughter of the children as they watched the suffering of others.

She thought about her innocence as a child and how okay this seemed to her.

She thought about her contribution to their suffering.

She thought about Beast 9001 again.

She thought about Jack Bammer.

She knew what she wanted to do.

“Mine!” She yelled as loudly as she could. And, before the Safari Guide could interrupt, she prepared her gun and aimed it on her target. She steadied her shaking hands and pulled the trigger.

Silence for a second, then the release of the bullet and…

BAM!

It makes contact with the target directly in the head.

Bullseye.

Grace sighed a sigh of relief mixed with triumph.

“Aw, too bad.” Responded the Safari Guide. “Great shot, but you hit one of our decoy Zookeepers. Good try, but too bad it was the wrong target.”
Grace chuckled and threw her hair back. “Yeah, too bad.” She said. “Maybe we should go back now. I’ve got things to do.”

“No problem, ma’am we are actually nearing the exit station.” He said while driving slowly up to a small building where he instructed the family and Grace to exit the vehicle and go collect their prizes.

Grace walked with her head held high into the building where she and each member of the other party were awarded a blue participation ribbon. It read *Thank you for keeping us safe.*

*No problem.* Thought Grace. *Anything I can do to help.*

She left the building and returned to the Zoo. She looked to her left at the line for the Safari filled with eager faces. She laughed at their stupidity.

She left to find Jack. She was on a mission. Her pace was fast and her feet seemed to know the exact path to the intake cage.

She passed artificial trees and stepped over the hard cobbled ground until she reached the rows and rows of intake cages. She ran immediately to Beast 9001’s cage and reached her hand far through his bars.

“Jack.” She said reaching for him.

He had dozed off in the corner of the cage near his cell mate, but his eyes fluttered open at the sound of his name. “Grace. You’re back!”

“Duh.” She said squeezing his hand as hard as she could. “Now get back.”

“What? Why? Grace what’re you going to do?” Jack said frantically as he watched Grace reach into her purse. She rummaged around and pulled out the handgun she had stolen from the Safari.
Jack scrambled to the back of his cage and exclaimed, “Grace what’re you doing?”

“Relax.” She said. “I have a plan. Wake up your cellmate, tell him it’s okay, I’m going to get you guys out.”

“You’re crazy.” Said Jack with wide eyes.

“This place is crazy, and I’m crazy for you.” She said.

“So, what’s your plan? Are you going to shoot me?” Jack chuckled nervously.

“Of course not. Are the Zookeepers coming back anytime soon?” Grace said.

“The one good thing about living on a regimented schedule is you’ll never be surprised. The Zookeepers won’t come back for three hours. We’re golden.” Said Jack.

“Perfect.” Grace said as she flipped the gun over in her hands. She reached for the lock that securely fastened the cage closed and she took the blunt end of the gun and struck the lock as hard as she could. It didn’t budge. “Shit.” She muttered.

“It’s okay. You’ve got this. Take a deep breath and try to hit it at an angle.” Suggested Jack.

Grace took a deep breathe, looked around, and steadied herself. She raised the butt of the gun and brought it crashing down with all her force on the rusty lock.

The lock came undone. “It came undone!” Grace yelled.

Grace and Jack both looked at each other in complete shock. “I didn’t think that would work.” She exclaimed.

“I didn’t either.” Laughed Jack.
Grace reached into his cage and extended an arm to the crouched over man. She helped him out of the cage as the other newly taken in Beasts looked on in amazement. She motioned for the rest of the Beasts to stay quiet. The Zookeepers could not hear any ruckus.

Grace supported the severely malnourished Jack as he steadied himself on his legs outside of his cage. He hadn’t been able to stand in a whole week and his legs shook beneath him, but he was free. Well, almost free.

“Come on out!” Grace motioned to Jack’s cellmate to leave his cage.

“This isn’t gunna work.” He said quietly.

“Trying is better than rotting away in this cage. Right?” Said Jack.

“Maybe, or if we get caught they’ll make our lives a living hell.” The cellmate retorted.

“Your life already is hell.” Said Grace. “But, you can stay here if you want.”

The cellmate contemplated this option. He looked around at the other Beasts crammed in their cages, and he looked at Jack who was standing freely on his own now.

“Give me a hand.” He said dryly.

“Gladly.” Grace smiled from ear to ear and reached her hand into the cage to help the man out.

Once both men were on her feet, Grace took a second to slow down. She felt her heart racing fast and she turned to Jack who must have been equally as nervous. They grabbed each other’s hands and leaned in for a kiss. It was short but so sweet.

Grace looked deeply into Jack’s eyes and said, “We’re in this together now.”
Jack pulled her into a warm embrace that was unlike any embrace she had felt before. She felt time freeze around her, and a single tear fell slowly down her cheeks and onto Jack’s boney shoulder.

“For forever.” Jack replied. “Now, what’s the plan, because I’m not leaving those men behind.” He said looking around at the eager eyes of the men in the intake cages.

“We’re leaving no one.” Said Grace with a fire in her voice.
The Grand Escape

“How’d you steal that thing anyways?” Asked Jack pointing to the gun in Grace’s hand.

“They gave a gun to a six year old, it wasn’t that hard.” Grace said lightly. “Now, we need to get all these intake Beasts freed so we can start on the others. The intake cages are the least heavily monitored and have the oldest and rustiest locks. You, me, and your cellmate can each go around breaking each lock, but I need you to tell the men to stay in their cages until everyone is free. This is important, they can’t run. It’s going to be nearly impossible freeing nine thousand Beasts as it is, but if we can all work together I think we can do it.”

“Got is, boss.” Responded Jack with a wink.

“Oh, and one more thing.” Said Grace pulling herself into Jack. “I’m pretty glad I met you.” She kissed him on the lips passionately, and he kissed her back.

Jack’s cellmate rolled his eyes and said, “Go!”

The three of them began working on the cage locks. Grace used the butt of her gun and she handed each of the men a large rock she had found on the ground on the way over here. “Get everyone a rock.” Grace told the men. “The cobbled roads are loose in a lot of spots. Try to find the biggest ones you can.”

The three of them split up and began banging locks loose. With strict instructions from Grace, Jack and his cellmate instructed the now free Beasts to stay in their cages until further notice.

“Bitch, you’re crazy if you think I’m staying in here.” Yelled one Beast to Grace.

“You’ll fuck it up for everyone if you don’t. Trust me, I’m not going to leave you.”

“And why would I trust you?” He responded bitterly.
“Because I’m the only one who understands that you’re not just a Beast. You’re a human too. You’re a man. You’re a son. What’s your name.” Grace asked.

“Jon Mason.”

“Well Jon, I’m going to ask you one more time to trust me. I promise I won’t let you down.” She reached through the cage and extended her hand to him. He slowly reached forward and grabbed the hand. She squeezed it, and he squeezed back.

“Now, please step back Jon.” Jon moved to the back of the cage and Grace struck the lock with as much force as she could muster. The lock broke off after one strike. She was getting good at this.

After fifteen minutes, Grace, Jack, and Jack’s cellmate were sweating profusely. After having limited movement for over a week, the men were struggling to perform such demanding physical exertion. All three of them panted heavily and stopped to catch their breath.

“We’re only halfway done.” Said Jack in between breaths.

“Please keep going. If we stop now we’re going to get caught.” Said Grace.

“Please don’t stop.” Chimed in multiple men from inside the intake cages.

“Yes, I really want out.”

“I have a family.”

“I didn’t commit a crime, I was just there.”

“I’m innocent.”

“I’m not, but I don’t deserve six decades. I didn’t hurt no one.”

The Beasts raised their lamentations high.

“Shushhh.” Said Grace. “We won’t stop.”
“All or nothing.” Responded Jack.

“For forever.” Called out Grace.

They began breaking locks once again with vengeance. Their energies were restored and after one final surge, they had released every single lock.

“Shit. Zookeeper.” Yelled one of the Beasts pointing behind Grace at an ornately dressed Zookeeper sauntering into the exhibit.

“I thought you said they weren’t coming back for three hours?” Grace yelled at Jack.

“Sometimes they show up unannounced. They’re the free ones. Go distract him.” Jack responded.


Grace shoved the gun that was in her hands back inside her purse, and she walked over to meet the Zookeeper.

“Hi, there ma’am.” Said the Zookeeper. “How’re you doing on this fine day?”

“I’m great! I’m really enjoying the Zoo. I just visited the intake cages, but was hoping to see one more exhibit before I leave for the day. Could you show me a good one?” Said Grace with a bat of her eyelashes and a flip of her hair.

“I’d be delighted. Follow me.”

“Gladly.”

Grace followed the Zookeeper through the convoluted paths and to a smaller pathway she had never been down before. She began to feel a pit in her stomach grow as she looked around and saw the crowds of people who once filled the sidewalks thinning.
“Where’re we going?” Grace asked.

“You’ll see shortly.” He said in a sultry voice.

“I think I’m going to go back.” Said Grace sharply as she turned to leave.

The Zookeeper reached for her arm and pulled her sharply back to face him.

“Sit down.” He said and he gestured to a small park bench that was located at the end of the path.

Grace complied and the Zookeeper sat next to her. The Zookeeper, with his hand still firmly gripped around Grace’s arm leaned in to kiss her. Grace pulled back and yelled, “hey!”

The Zookeeper placed his free hand on Grace’s head and forced her face close to his. Once again he kissed her and didn’t let go.

Coming up for air, the Zookeeper said, “I know what you’re doing.”

“What do you mean? Fuck you. I’m going to tell your supervisor.” Spit Grace.

“And I’ll tell him you’re releasing the Beasts. My supervisor will never believe you anyway.”

Grace lost all train of thought and felt the color rush out of her face.

“Don’t worry. I promise I won’t tell if you don’t.” Laughed the Zookeeper.

He forced another kiss upon Grace’s lips and moved his hands from her arm to her body.

Grace, without thinking, reached for the gun in her purse and slammed it into the Zookeeper’s head with as much force as she could muster. She watched his eyes roll in the back of his head and blood start to gush from the wound.

Was he dead?

She checked his pulse.
It was still there. He was just unconscious.

She couldn’t tell if she was relieved or sad about that.

“Shit.” She muttered under her breath as she got up and proceeded to run back to the intake cages.

After a decently lengthed run, she arrived back to the cages out of breath and slightly dishevelled. She was met by the concerned gaze of hundreds of intake Beasts.

“I’m okay. We’re okay.” She said. “We’ve gotta go though. Listen up.”

“Wait, Grace. Slow down.” Said Jack exiting his cage and rushing towards her.

“There’s no time. I want everyone to listen closely: Your cages are unlocked. You can flee by yourself, or you can help rescue the other thousands of Beasts who are locked in this same Hell as you. If you flee by yourself, there is no way you will get through the exits without getting shot down by a Zookeeper. But, if we flee together, they can’t take down all nine thousand of us.

So, I want everyone to divide up and go release the Petting Zoo Beasts, the Lifers, and the Parrots. The Petting Zoo Beasts just need to be lead out of the doors, which remain unlocked. Your only obstacle will be the Zookeeper in charge of that section. Take your rocks, but do not harm civilians. Understand.”

The Beasts nodded in understanding.

“The Parrots and Lifers cages have the same locks that were used to secure your cages. Hopefully, they will be equally as rusted. You should have no problem freeing them. Once the Beasts are free use their strength and help to free all other exhibits.

Ideally, we will be out in fifteen minutes if we have all hands on deck.”
“Not all cages have your standard locks.” Chimed Jack.

“Babe, it makes me sad that you would doubt me.” Grace pulled an ID access card from her purse. “I swiped it from the Zookeeper after I knocked him unconscious.” Grace smiled at Jack.


“Right. Once everyone is out, we rush the front entrance. The Zookeeper’s will try to stop us if they get wind of our plan, but if we move fast, we will have the numbers. Remember you stick out like sore thumbs in your jumpsuits, so stealth will be hard, but there are trees for coverage and if you’re quiet, you might be able to free some of our people before anyone notices.”

The intake Beasts roared with approval and began crawling out of their cages. At first, their legs were stiff and they struggled to stand, but after only a few minutes strength returned to them. The adrenaline of the day pumped through their bodies and provided them just enough energy to complete this task.


“For forever.” He whispered back and gave her a kiss on the forehead.

“Then let’s fucking go!” Grace yelled and began running with Jack by her side. She hoped this time she wouldn’t get lost in the maze of the Zoo.

In a flash, all the intake cages were empty and the Beasts were galavanting around the Zoo tasting freedom, but still remaining so far from it.
On the News

Grace’s sister reached for her phone and dialed a seven digit number.

She got the voicemail: *Hi this is Grace, I can’t come to the phone right now. I’m probably off saving the world or drinking mimosas. Anyway, call back later. Bye!* 

Grace’s sister left a voice message. “Hi Gracie, I hope all is well. I told Sydney you offered to take her to the Zoo again and she was ecstatic. Maybe I could come next time! Well, give me a ring back when you get this and take it easy on the mimosas.” She laughed. “Talk to you later.” She hung up the phone.

“Syd!” She yelled down the hallway of her house. “Wanna watch some TV with me?”

“Coming!” Sydney called back scurrying down the hallway and into the living room. She flopped herself happily on the couch and curled up next to her mom.

Sydney took ahold of the TV remote and began flipping through channels.

“Stop!” Her mom yelled. “Go back.”

“Why?” Sydney asked flipping the channels back.

“Right there. Oh my god.”

“Is that Auntie Grace?” Said Sydney looking at the TV monitor. “Why is she on TV?”

“I have no idea.” Responded her mom leaning in to her the news channel.

A preppy blonde woman with too much makeup began speaking:

*Nine thousand zoo monsters were released in Central Park at three O’clock pm Saturday March, 16 by an unidentified woman. The woman was last seen wearing a denim jacket with matching flared denim pants. She was wearing a bright yellow top and has light brown hair. She*
has brown eyes and stands roughly 5’5”'. If you or anyone else has any information on her whereabouts, please call the Daily News Hotline, or call 199 to reach the Monster Hunters directly.

A month later, a Daily News update was broadcasted across the area:

    After a month of unrest, I am happy to announce every monster released in last month’s debacle has been exterminated. The Monster Hunters were able to shoot down roughly five thousand of the nine thousand monsters. The remaining monsters died naturally in society.

    Thank you to all the citizens who turned your backs on the begging beasts. It was only through your denial of food, money, or jobs that these creatures were able to be starved out of our life. Many donned street clothes and begged you to see them as human, but you stood your ground and denied, denied, denied.

    Remember that these monsters may look like us, but they are not us. We will always be superior as long as we retain our moral high ground. It is possible to slip into beast hood, so let this story be a cautionary tale.

    The woman responsible for the tragic monster release has officially been captured. Her identity was revealed as Grace Millman, but she will now be known as Monster 001, the first exhibit of our new and improved Zoo. Come one, come all, and see this heinous beast, but careful not to let her go or you just might end up where she is.
The End

It’s not very good, but now you’ve read it. I like it because I can say I’m an author. It’s better than saying I’m a criminal, you know.

Anyway, I ended up doing okay in prison. I got my GED and took six college writing classes! They gave me the courage to write this and lots of other short stuff. I wrote it all down and sleep with it every night. I am an author, and they can’t take that away from me.

You know, we're all just tryna' be someone in here. You come in with this identity that defines you, but then they take it away. They cut your hair and strip you of your clothes. They take away your name and reduce you to a number. They turn you into a no one, so you’ve got to fight to be someone.

So, how did I get here? I got here because when I was born, I was born without a father, into a life of poverty, and with mental health obstacles already set in place in my life. I’m not bitching about what I was given, I’m not. I get it, everyone’s life is hard. But you know what makes these things even more difficult to overcome? Being born into a family where all the men have been in prison at least once and all the women have a high school degree at most and multiple children from different shit men. You know what makes life even harder? Being poor. That makes goddamn everything harder.

I used to think sending people to prison was simple. If you are in prison, it means you did something wrong. But it’s not that simple. This world makes up crimes and then forces them on us.

It shouldn’t be a crime to be poor, or uneducated, or disabled.

But yet, somehow it is.
They tell us to try harder and climb out of this shithole, but we were never given a ladder. So when I look around at the inmates, I don’t see fucked up people. I see a fucked up system. I’m not just in here because of how my life started though. No, like all my brothers I am in here because of a cascade of events that were slowly building and would eventually crash down on me. We all make choices, but my choices just had more serious consequences. Threatening the only man who had ever cared for me.

Hiding my love for school.

Trying to be tough.

Fighting.

Trying wine.

Trying more than wine.

Not standing up to my anger.

Those were all my mistakes. But how can you expect a young boy to know the consequences of these things when there is no one in his life to explain it to him. All my choices were shit.

Be tough, or get beaten.

Fight or get bullied.

Drink to find happiness, or live in my world of darkness.

Let out my anger or shake with rage all day unable to focus on anything else.

You can’t condemn someone for choosing the path of survival. We’re all just trying to survive, but this world makes it pretty hard.

I thought I’d stop thinking about death once I was free. I was wrong though.
One day in prison, I tattooed “Good” on one eyelid and “Night” on the other. They complimented my other face tats nicely.

I truly thought these would be my last marks, because that night I was going to hang myself with wire I had accumulated throughout my last few years in prison. I would wait until mid afternoon when my roommate was playing cards in the rec room. He was good to me; I don’t want him to see. If I’m quick enough and keep my mouth shut, the guards won’t be able to revive me in time. In my casket, my eyes would tell the world “good night.” It’s been a good run, but I was ready to go.

I wasn’t strong, maybe physically, but my mind was weak. I was soft. I didn’t fit in in the mainstream world, and I didn’t fit in in the underworld. I didn’t have a place.

I woke up the next day in a hospital bed. My neck was raw and my body ached strangely. I was confused, but I was alive. I’m not sure why, but I bowed my head in the hospital bed and I prayed for the first time in ten years. And, I said thank you. Thank you to the angels up above who must still be there. That next week I put a simple cross on my cheek. When I look at this cross, I imagine strength and it helps. I still don’t believe in a God, because if he truly exists, then he’s an asshole. But I actually read something, a poem or thought piece I think, that really made me think hard about my life.

It said something about God being in each of us, and so when you pass a beggar by on the street and refuse him money, you’re actually being tested my God and failing. I wonder sometimes if I am God. Not in a vain way, but like am I a test for others.

Am I a test to see how people respond to a monster on the streets?

Am I a test to see how cruelly people can act towards other people?
Am I a test for myself, to see how resilient I can be, and how patient I can be with this system and this world God supposedly created?

I hope I’m not a test, because all of y’all have failed miserably.

You know, I only have one colored tattoo on my face. The rest is covered by the dark blue ink that gets smuggled in prison, it’s cheaper. But right on the side of my face next to my left ear, I have a small rose. It’s a bright red and has a small green stem. That one is you, Rose. The girl who tried so hard to help me and who I tried so hard to push away. You are a flower, innocent and pure. And I am sorry, sissy.

You sent me a letter every month, but I have never responded. What would I say? I’m sorry I am so fucked up? I’m sorry you still try? You wouldn’t get it, only the weird thing is, you might. You are the only color in my life. Your whole life has always been in color, so I don’t think you gets how important someone like you is when you live in a dull world of dread and oppression.

You are positive and cheerful, and I don’t tell you, but I am thankful for that. I don’t want to dull you shine, ever, so I won’t respond. And one day, for your sake, I hope you move on, but for my sake I hope that day never comes. Rose, I am sorry, and I appreciate you. Please, know you made our momma proud, you were the one she was proud of.

I didn’t want to be bad. I am in prison, but I am not just a criminal. I am a man, I am a son, I am a caring person, and now I can say I am an author. People in here always try to become someone else, because who wants to be a criminal.

There’s this guy, he's a dope dude. He wants to be the next Lil' Pump. He's got a face full of tats just like me, and he's got these dope dreads, for a white guy at least. His momma really
supports him too. She sends him shit almost every week, like books about music and stuff. I don't know if he'll make it, but damn that’d be cool.

There's a lot of hope in this place, but it's the short term hope, you know? Like that excitement for a few weeks about a project or dream. It's really cool to watch the high people get when they think about success. But then, the reality of their situation sets in and their eyes turn downcast and their shoulders slump a little. The hopes fade away, because let's be honest, no one is gunna be anyone in here.

People in prisons are simply the outcasts of society. We will never amount to anything, so they stick us in here to rot away and they stifle every hope we have. I say keep dreaming kid. And, if you get big one day, hopefully you'll remember where you came from. Someone has got to make it, because the entirety of this damn system relies on it. Just imagine if this kid becomes a famous singer and he leaves jail and makes mills. He can help us all. The people on the outside with money will never help us because they don't get it, but he would get it. You've got this bro.

Now that I’m out, I gotta figure out who I am all over again, and no one helps you with that. They told me on a Tuesday morning I was getting released. Three hours later I was standing at the edge of the prison with a baggie of my belongings in one hand and the signed release form in the other. No one was coming to get me, so I got a taxi. They gave me $20 for the fare. I would’ve rather they gave me a clean set of clothes, but hey you take what you can get.

So I took a taxi home, but Momma was dead and I wasn’t about to bother you, so I didn’t exactly know where home was. I told the taxi driver our old address and I milled around the streets for a bit. Freedom felt weird.
You know that’s why a lot of people end up back in here? Because they have nowhere to go. The druggies get returned right back to their drug haven, and the violent get returned right back to their network of friends who encourage violence.

One of the best guys I met in prison, Nicky, was a heroin addict. Got caught on multiple occasions buying and selling. Well, he hit rock bottom and ended up killing a little girl on accident one day when he was driving strung out. He got forty years in prison for that.

He told me the day I met him, that he had been sober since the day he got arrested. He said, for that little girl’s sake, he would never use again. He’s back in prison now, charged with heroin use.

When he got out the first time, he had no home to go back to, and most his family was dead. He found some old friends who still lived in his old neighborhood and he started hanging with them. They weren’t using anymore, but they still sold occasionally.

Nicky couldn’t find a good job, but eventually a fast food place hired him. Got him just enough money not to qualify for government aid, but not enough to live any quality of life, so he self medicated to cope with the poverty. He started using again. He missed his probation meetings. He got fired from his job. He hit rock bottom again, and it’s the goddamn prison’s fault.

So, when I ran into an old buddy of mine who said I could crash with him for a few days, I was really weary.

There were drugs everywhere, sissy. Coke, and pot, and heroin: good shit.
I thought I could stay sober despite it, but it was too hard. I couldn’t stay there because I knew I’d cave. After almost fifteen years of not using, despite the ample opportunities in prison, I still craved it just as much as I used to. God I am weak.

So I spent a few nights on the local park bench; it wasn’t as uncomfortable as you’d think. But, the shame is what got to me. I felt dirty and like people were judging me. A woman gave me a dollar. I almost yelled at her, but then I realized how thankful I was for this charity. I had no money and no food. How was being free harder than being in prison?

I wandered the streets and found this dumpster that rich people use. I was just looking for some food, but I ended up finding clothes and this video camera. I almost left it. Why would I need a video camera. Then I thought, I need to talk to you. I need to tell you why: why I never talked to you before.

But, the video camera didn’t work. So, I brought it into a store and they said it needed an SD card. I started panhandling on the sidewalk downtown and after only three days, I made enough to afford a cheap one.

You know, panhandling is funny. I learned a lot about people by the way they responded to me out on the streets. Most people would pretend not to see me. It’s easier to calm your conscience that way. When people would see me, they would quickly turn away, but always catch them sneaking a second glance.

What got me most was the kids. They would tug and pull at their parents to try to get them to notice me, but the parents would keep walking. They would tell their kids, “He’s homeless.” “He’s dirty.” “We’ve got to go.” But the kids would just stay staring at me until they were too far gone. I truly believe the kids would try to help if their parents let them.
The most generous people were the ones who didn’t have much themselves. The people in the simple clothes, or those working two jobs, would always give to me. I talked with a few of these people and they simply said, “people helped me when I needed it the most, so if I can return that favor, I will.”

This kindness was rare. It’s sad.
Goodbye

I won’t be here for much longer, I simply can’t. So that’s why now is so important. I need you to realize how badly I screwed up, and how sorry I am. I want you to forgive me, but I understand if you can’t. This, this was my life. Living in a shit neighborhood with anger inside my body and no help to get it out. Being forced to give up on anything good because it was either too expensive, or my friends would beat my ass if they found out. Watching you grow up perfectly, with your shiny bright skin and your big brains. You went to counseling when your dad thought you might be depressed. You had gotten a C on a paper. You weren’t depressed. But yet, you got counseling.

You got to travel the world, and you told me about it. I was happy for you, but it stung when I read about your adventures. You would paint me pictures of these crazy-ass hikes in New Zealand or pagodas and temples in Vietnam, and I would stare at my white cell wall and image what you wrote.

I would imagine the colors swirling on the wall and I would imagine the fresh air beating against my face. I would imagine I was there with you. I’m sorry I couldn’t be there. But, I used your words sissy, in my book. I took your hikes and your crazy good descriptions and I painted them into my scenes. My nod to you.

I wish I could tell you this all face to face, or that you could be here when I make my decision. Who knows, maybe you could’ve talked me out of it. But, in a way I’m glad that you’re not here. You’re off in the real world, with your real family, and your real life. While I have stayed still, you have exceeded everyone’s expectations and progressed so far. You are this family’s pride.
So, I don’t want you here with me, because I only drag people, and myself down.

Whatever they say about me, know I didn’t mean to be a bad person. Know that I was just trying to survive. Know that I regret hurting others, and know that if someone would’ve helped me earlier, maybe I wouldn’t have done what I did.

Know that you are my favorite person despite the shit I put you through, and know that I kept all your letters and read them everyday before bed. I am out of prison now, but I am no happier. I can’t get a job because I am a felon. And, I can’t get a job because my face does not match up with the image people want to see. I am tainted.

It’s been one month since I left prison, and each day I long to go back. Prison was my home, it was my safe space. In the dark shadows of my cell is where I felt most secure. I slept with a handmade shank from an old toothbrush buried against my chest, knowing that if someone came in the night, it was them who would be sorry.

But out here, in the open, I feel so exposed. So naked and bare that I fear my handmade shank won’t stand a chance against their modern day weapons. I long to stay inside, in the dark confines of my one bedroom apartment, but the hot and steamy breath of the dragon breathes down my neck daily.

Find a job.

Attend AA.

Make this meeting.

Make this court date.

Pay these bills.

I physically don’t know if I can do this.
I want to retreat back to my cell where my day is scheduled and ordered. I miss my friends and I miss the feeling of being someone. In prison I was hot shit. Out here, I’m dog shit.

I need a job, according to my probation officer, but he doesn’t seem to have any suggestions for me. He told me I better get looking, that I have two weeks left or else. Or else what? You’ll send me back to prison? Please do. At least I have friends in there and get three meals a day.

I’ll never be able to be helped in this society, because I don’t belong. Before going into prison, I was abnormal. I did drugs and had tats, and I was a deviant. My neighborhood was the underworld. The world of dealing and using, pushing and pulling. For every force exerted by mainstream society, there was an equal and opposite force down below.

Yes, I was abnormal, but I could float up to mainstream society if I wanted to. I could don some boujee clothes and do up my hair and pretend to fit in. But one I left prison, my place in the underworld was cemented in.

In the past three days I have had one EggMcMuffin and a hash brown. You need a job to get money.

At least in prison, I got a daily anti depression medication. Out here, you need a job to get health insurance to get medications you can afford. I would go to the free clinic, but you need a job to make money to afford a car to drive to the free clinic.

I am hungry, I am sad, I am lonely, and I am worthless.

I am an Ex-Criminal.

I feel the power of my cell bars even more despite being free from prison.
So, I hope this videotape reaches you, because I want you to know that I tried, but I just couldn’t do it. I love you, sissy. Please keep on being good.
Felon Raymond Sake was found dead on a park bench in Maytown Park late Saturday afternoon. According to local sources, two eight year-old-girls were playing on the playground when they approached their mother. Mother Susan McAndrew recalls, “they were crying saying there was a monster in the park. I told them monsters don’t exist and I went over to the bench where they were pointing. I found a man who at the time I thought to be dead. It was a gruesome sight. He had tattoos completely covering his face and he was very dirty. He smelled like booze. It is a shame to have people like this in the parks where our children play.” The man was later identified and declared dead. Having been incarcerated for drug related incidents and aggravated assault, he was released on February 18, 2020. Sake’s death was deemed suicide by local autopsy specialist. An overdose was the likely cause.

“It’s sad that he’s dead,” claims McAndrew, “But, like, at the same time I am happy the park is a safer place. If he was that sad, he should’ve gotten help.” Hand written papers were found scattered around the park bench. Due to the heavy storm last night, both Mew’s and the papers were thoroughly soaked. Among the hundreds of papers, only one page, which was found clenched in Mew’s hands, was legible. It read “Zoo. By: 101593”

There will be no service held.