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THE BILLINGS ZOO has no animals.

Fewer than twenty-four hours ago, I was standing in Gray's Papaya on Seventy-Second Street and Amsterdam Avenue in New York City, watching passersby ignore someone who was having what appeared to be an epileptic seizure while eating a chili dog. Taxicabs whirred by, mere mustard stains on the frankfurter that is the Upper West Side. Hordes of humans hustling in every direction, screaming, shouting, howling.

Now, I am in a place so quiet that I can still hear the noises of Manhattan in the back of my skull, like they are working their way out, slowly. And I am at a zoo where I may actually be the wildest life.

I'm here because after we landed and got our rental car for the summer, my mother suggested she take me for "a treat." We cruised past multiple Arby's and shops that sell discount mattresses and a Wonder Bread thrift store, whatever that is. She dropped me here, at the zoo, and told me she'd pick me up in a couple hours, after she got us settled in at my dad's house. She said that the zoo might be a place to "locate and center myself" before seeing him for the first time in fourteen years.

My mom, a therapist slash school counselor, "hears" that I feel like she's ripped me out of my normal summer, but "what she wants to say to me" is that I need to stop moping. And what better place to drop off a mopey seventeen-year-old boy in a strange new city than

at the zoo? Had she just asked me where I wanted to go, I would have been like, *I don't know, a coffee shop. A movie theater.* Any place a guy in his summer before senior year might want to hang. But whatever. My mom is down with the kids and how they all just want to stare at monkeys all day.

I do, in fact, feel a little ripped out of my normal summer — such as it is. But it's possible that I'm milking it a bit. I mean, I was going to be working at a Pinkberry on the Upper West Side, which is the best frozen yogurt place in the city, tied with every other frozen yogurt place in the city, as they are all exactly the same. I won't actually miss that. So "ripped" may be a little strong.

The zoo is apparently called ZooMontana, as it is the greatest of all the Montana zoos. At the gate, I buy a ticket from an old, tired-looking bald man and walk in. I wind through the trees along roped-off gravel trails. There are some nice trees. But what becomes painfully apparent is that there are basically no animals.

Perhaps because there are no animals, there are also no people at the zoo. Well, a few people. The bald ticket taker. And I come across a wedding procession at one point, with an overly chipper, pregnant bride in an off-white gown, and a goateed dude in a polyester suit by her side, his greasy mullet glistening in the sun.

Matrimony at a zoo with no animals. Wedding bliss fail.

I finally do find one lonely, depressed Siberian tiger. Here he is in the Siberia of America, lazing on the ground, staring into space, a look of what that guy Kierkegaard would call existential despair in his eyes. (Thanks, philosophy class!) I can barely blame him. I am that tiger. Relocated against my will for the summer to the northern

tundra of my country, with nothing to do, nothing to look at, nothing but nothing.

So after I decide that sitting and staring at a depressed tiger isn't all it's cracked up to be, I walk back toward the entrance to the gift shop (plastic eagle sculptures and red-tailed squirrel magnets) to fritter away my final ninety-five minutes here (but who's counting).

A ridiculously beautiful girl is organizing the greeting card display. In terms of attractiveness, she is in the 99.9th percentile of zoo employees. Her skin is black, almost purple black, and her jeans are dark blue and super tight. Her voluminous hair covers her ears almost entirely. She has sinewy arm muscles like the gymnastics girls back at my high school in the Bronx, and she wears a turquoise tank top that shows off her curves just right. Her face is wow. Soft, clear skin, uberhigh cheekbones that seem to pull her cheeks upward like a slingshot.

I can't take my eyes off her. I do not believe in God, but in this instance, I wonder if there's some deity to thank for the miracle of a dazzling girl in an otherwise deserted zoo. And I decide it's very important to get a closer look at the greeting cards.

As I get within about five feet of her, she turns slightly toward me. I instinctively lower my head and turn away, as if I'm now perusing the almost empty shelf of stuffed animals, which consists of two pink frogs. I want so much to be the kind of guy who knows what to say in this situation. Unfortunately, I'm about 3,000 percent better in my brain than out of it. I've tried it before, verbalizing my thoughts to other people. It rarely works well.

She faces me completely now.

"Under what circumstance would you buy a greeting card in which a bear is dancing through a field of sunflowers?" she asks.

She's taken a half step toward me, and I am now close enough to smell a light trace of her sweat. I try to pretend this has no effect on me. She shows me the card. On it, a cartoon bear pirouettes through a pretty field. Somehow, I manage to say actual words.

"Are you trying to figure out what section to put it in?" I ask.

Her eyebrows are arched like boomerangs in a way that suggests mischief. "Yep."

"Is there a sympathy section?"

She raises her left eyebrow even higher. "Why?"

"I would put it there. Maybe someone whose bear just got shot might get some comfort from imagining the bear dancing through a field of flowers."

She purses her lips and nods. "I guess I'll have to make a sympathy section."

"Glad I could help," I say, unable to take my eyes off her. And the crazy thing is, she's still looking at me too. Is Billings like a magical parallel universe where I am a guy to whom hot girls voluntarily speak? She is waiting for me to say something, and I worry that I might say all the wrong things, and then I think, *Screw it, why worry about saying the wrong thing when you surely will anyway? Just do it.* So I do.

"So what is there to see here?" I ask.

She puts the card back. In the birthday section, I notice. "What do you want to see?"

I gulp. "Well, animals, for starters. No offense, but this is not quite the Bronx Zoo."

She looks me over. Up, down, up. “Not from around here,” she says. “Lucky.”

I smile, relieved she isn’t a huge Billings fan. “Just off the plane like two hours ago.”

“And you came to the zoo . . .”

“My mom . . .” I say, like it’s obvious what comes next. Then I realize that’s not a sentence that works without finishing the thought. “I’m one of those few, fortunate, proud New Yorkers who gets to spend the summer in Billings.”

“Well, today’s your lucky day. Want a tour?”

“You do tours?”

Her smile starts with her eyes. They open a bit wider, and then her face animates, as if her eyes are part of a pulley system that controls her upper lips, which rise, allowing me to see her perfect, glistening teeth. “Do I do tours? Five bucks will get you the best darn tootin’-est zoo tour you ever done dreamed of,” she says in a cowboy accent.

I grab my wallet, pull out a five, and hand it to her. “Did you just say ‘tootin’-est’?”

She slowly nods. “I sher did,” she says, her voice authoritative. She stuffs the five in her pocket and leads me outside. The sun is out and it’s warm, like bread just out of the oven at a bakery, and the trees are every shade of green possible. In my first walk, I hadn’t actually looked at a lot of the nature stuff. Just like how I was still hearing the noises of New York City, I think the sights were still inside my eyes too. Where I live, life is mostly concrete and brick. We have a park — two, actually, near our apartment — but even when you’re so deep in one of those parks that you can’t see out, it’s hard to

forget that the world is skyscrapers and boutiques, bodegas and subway tracks. In a way, those things feel more real to me than this scenery.

We take a footbridge over a creek, and while we walk, she tells me the zoo's history. Apparently it was built in 1922 as a refuge for wildlife dislocated by the 1921 caldera eruption in Washington State. Volunteers from all over the West hauled as many animals as they could to Billings.

"Wow," I say. I've heard about calderas, which are like extreme volcanos, but I hadn't realized there had actually been one in the U.S.

"If it seems empty, you have to understand," she says. "The zoo has a policy of not taking in any other animals. So these are all the descendants of those first arrivals all those years ago. It keeps the place pure."

At the red-tailed squirrel habitat, she explains that the squirrels used to live in the redwood forests of California. "They're amazing creatures. Did you know they only mate during a full moon?"

"Really?"

"That's right," she says.

We pass a sign that reads WOLF WOODS, and she puts her hands on the mesh enclosure.

"There are four wolves left. There were many more at one time, but one of the wolves was a psychopath."

I laugh, figuring she is making a joke. She doesn't laugh back. I catch sight of one of the wolves. He's white with steely eyes, and he's staring at me. I feel a shiver run through my veins.

"A psychopath?"

“Well, what would you call it? Wolves were showing up dead. Disemboweled. They couldn’t figure out who had done it, so they brought in a wolf detective. She got right to solving the case. We only lost three more after that, and once she found the killer, they hung him.”

I look out at the area. A wolf detective! I’ve never heard of that. And then I look back at her. “Wait. They hung a wolf?”

She sucks her lips in, rolls her eyes up, and stares at the sky. “Too much?”

“You made that all up, didn’t you?” I ask.

She tilts her head. “I may have.”

“Cool,” I say.

“Is it?”

I think, *Yeah*. It’s the kind of thing that the improv comedy group at my high school does. I joined this year, because of a girl, of course, and that didn’t work out, of course. But I really like improv. I like coming up with stuff no one’s ever come up with before. “It’s totally cool,” I say.

It feels like she is exploring my face with her eyes. “Interesting,” she says.

I scratch my ear. “Do they know you make stuff up on your tours?”

“I have no idea.”

“Do you even work here?”

“I do not.”

I laugh. “Wow.”

“You want your money back?” She takes the crumpled five out of her pocket.

I wave her off. "Nah. It was totally worth it. More than worth it. Why do you do that?"

She shrugs and stuffs the money back into her pocket. "Why does anyone do anything? Why do red-tailed squirrels only mate during a full moon?"

"They don't, do they?"

She shrugs again. "Beats the shit out of me."

I grin. "I like that. That's like something I would do."

"Well, you know," she says, demurely kicking up her back foot in a way that doesn't match her personality at all. I can tell it's meant to be funny, and it is.

"I'm Carson Smith," I say.

"Aisha," she says back. "Aisha Stinson."

"You made all that shit up? The wolf detective?"

"Most definitely. *Especially* the part about the wolf detective."

We start walking again. "So is that a detective who deals with wolf crimes, or a wolf who is a detective? And if it's the latter, is it exclusively focused on wolf crimes?"

Aisha seems to ponder this. "It can be all of the above."