

*From THE ZOO WHERE YOU'RE FED TO GOD, a novel by Michael Ventura  
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*(Pages 38-51)*

He had never seen creatures of such delicacy. They were some kind of antelope. They had the name “gerenuk”; it seemed not to fit them at all, Americans would pronounce it as he was tempted to, some sort of Germanic “jer-rer-nuke” or “ger-rer-nuck.” What was the language of the namers? He’d never seen nor heard of the beasts. He stood transfixed by their delicacy.

There were nine. Such long legs, so thin it seemed you might snap them with no more than a hard grip. Compact torsos, sweetly rounded. Sleek fine fur. Long-necked, necks fully as long as their legs. And a tiny, fawnlike face. With long, long ears, pointy-tipped, turning precisely toward each new sound. Small curved horns on one. The lightest shade of brown on their legs, flanks, and necks—brown just before it is white; their backs a little darker, and mottled; white bellies. And every step taken, and each turn of the head, was dancelike, as though they moved to a light, airy music of clear small notes and sudden, very still silences in which they stood with nothing moving but their modest tails, dark-tasseled, flicked with quick snaps to keep the flies off the anus.

They stood at their enclosure—hard ground, sun-dried grass, some rocks, surrounded by a high wall, with trees and vines overgrowing the wall from the other side. They stood straight and almost unbearably alert in a group, each facing a slightly different way, such that the field of vision of the little herd covered all possible threat from any side. They were beings who could not feel safe, never felt safe, even here, where if you coughed their flanks would twitch, if a motor revved far off they’d register it, so with all the children’s cries at this busy day at the zoo—the gerenuk constantly blinked, flicked their ears, twitched their flanks, and gave little sharp kicks with their impossibly thin legs, tiny hooves stamping the ground as though about to flee. Clearly in the wild anything could hurt them. They lived by virtue of their alertness—an alertness, a sensitivity, excruciating to watch. How could they bear it? And here, in this enclosure, they were denied the only act that could satisfy their fear, the all-out running for which they were made, for which they longed. They shocked him. That was it. Their delicacy was shocking. So he stood there for the longest time.

Most people, mostly children, looked at the gerenuk quickly and went on. In the raucous atmosphere of the crowded zoo, the air shrill with children calling to parents, parents calling to children, children calling to each other, it would take a special child to gaze long at the gerenuk. The man James Abbey felt like that child. Surely they couldn’t bear to be this way *all* the time, surely, no creature could bear to be *that* frightened? He took his eyes away long enough to read the sign again. They were from Kenya and Somalia. There was famine in Somalia now, drought and civil war. Thousands of human beings dying every day, millions expected to die, the images on the news so terrible even he would turn away. Little children with their mouths hanging open because their jaws were too weak to hold them closed, eyes abuzz with flies—their tiny arms, thinner than the legs of the gerenuk, could not brush the flies away. Before his eyes, if he did not turn his head, each child would become his son. In the footage there were no animals at all.

The cats and dogs had no doubt been eaten by now. With all this, and the drought, the fantastic delicate gerenuk must be gone from there.

That was merely tragedy. Tragedy moved him, but it did not impress him. Tragedy was business as usual. But this creature, this gerenuk, truly impressed him. Even after, finally, he tore himself away. And wondered if, in his well-made, well-pressed clothes, with his new Panama hat at a slight tilt, and the healthy tinge of his skin, wondered if he could possibly look the way he felt, haunted by the delicacy, the delicacy, of the gerenuk.

Lion food, that was the gerenuk. Cheetah food. Leopard and hyena food, food of wild dogs. The man James Abbey sought out the lions.

It had been reported in the *Los Angeles Times* not long ago that a man had committed suicide by jumping into the lion enclosure. It must have delighted the lions, the moments following quickly one after the other: threat, attack, victory—the devouring, before anyone could interfere. What interested Abbey were the fantasies the suicide must have nursed, perhaps for weeks, who knows, even years: of the moment of leaping, of being overpowered by the beasts, of being torn. Of people watching. Children watching. That must have been important to the suicide, the watching, for he'd chosen a crowded day.

Abbey approved of it as a way of death—all except the watching. He couldn't like or admire anyone who needed that much watching.

Abbey wondered if the suicide had read up on such things, had read, as Abbey had when a boy, Dr. Livingstone's journals of Africa: "Starting and looking half round, I saw the lion, just in the act of springing on me. I was upon a little height; he caught my shoulder as he sprang and we both came to the ground together. Growling horribly close to my ear, he shook me as a terrier dog does a rat. The shock caused a kind of dreaminess, in which there was no sense of pain nor feeling of terror, though quite conscious of all that was happening. This singular condition was not the result of any mental process. The shake annihilated the fear, and allowed no sense of horror in looking round at the beast." That was the dazed look one saw on antelope or water buffalo being eaten alive by lions and hyenas in the National Geographic films. Clearly once the feeding started they were in another state, no longer afraid. Was this the state the suicide was seeking, moments of pure consciousness, painless, unafraid, wonderful clarity as he experienced and even watched the creature ravage his body? Or was he ignorant, did he *expect* pain, but find instead a terrible purity of seeing that he had not sought? And did he know things in those moments that were revelation, and worth it all; or was there something in that dreamlike clarity that told him, as he died, he was a fool?

James Abbey reflected that few gerenuk had the luxury of achieving that gifted state of dying. They were too delicate, their slender necks could be broken too easily; simply the impact of the pounce of the cheetah or lion would probably, to his surgeon's eye, either kill them outright or knock them unconscious. What then, could be the joys of the gerenuk? Their coupling? The company of one another? To nibble sweet fruit, perfectly ripe, during a pause between threats? And is this what made them our brothers and our sisters?

"Is she right? Am I going mad?"

He said it almost aloud. His lips moved, He remembered the sudden shock and concern in Elizabeth's eyes.

He had arrived at the place of the lions.

It was not much of a place. A moat of still, scummy water between the barrier wall and a flat half-circle of hard ground, a few rocks, a little shade—more comfortable than a cage, perhaps, but surely, for the likes of a lion, no less boring. And possibly more confusing. When Abbey was a boy, zoos had cages, not enclosures or “habitats.” He remembered a huge tiger who paced the cage incessantly, rubbing his nose against the bar as he paced. The skin of the nose had rubbed away, it had to be a painful wound, yet the tiger never let it heal, rubbing the open wound against the bars every day. That tiger knew where it was, knew it was in a cage, knew it wanted to get out, and it was doing something you wouldn’t expect an animal to do: keeping its fierceness alive by intentionally causing itself pain.

Nothing like these two, these lionesses, sitting listless in the sun, beset by flies. The man knew that predators in the wild spend most of their time resting—it wasn’t that the beasts were still, it was the helplessness of the lioness before the flies. They were being tormented, flies on their faces, at the tails—yet aside from some twitches and blinks (or simply closing their eyes for a time, though one kept her head erect with closed eyes) these lions did little. Huge beasts, but ragged looking; they had a hopeless air. You can *see* when energy comes off a being—the gerenuks were so very alive—and this is true of people as well (all doctors know this); but no life energy came from these lions. Or had they been drugged because of the suicide? It hadn’t been more than a few months. You’d think the zookeepers could have done something about the flies; Abbey couldn’t imagine why there were so many flies here, and far fewer at other enclosures (no more than seemed normal at the gerenuks). What was it about flies? They bothered the people too, people carrying soft drinks, people eating cotton candy. And there were yellow jackets, not pestering the lions, but hovering around people’s sweets, especially children with sodas, who would panic, swat wildly, scream and run, and their parents or grandparents would yell and run, and everybody would be upset, though neither the lion nor the lioness registered any of this commotion—children boosting themselves on the barricade yelling, “Lion! Lion!” “Here, kitty, kitty, kitty!” Clicks of cameras. Daddies with minicams. (He saw no mommies carrying minicams.) Would Daddy go home and watch on his television, and show to his children, and show to his neighbors, and show to his relatives, the flies abuzz about the head of the lioness? That man is a Daddy and I am a Daddy and my father was a Daddy, James Abbey said to himself; and in Somalia, as at this place, flies are the only privileged; and I cannot fit these pieces together. He was glad Eddie had not seen these lions.

As he walked away from the lions, past the stench of the camels, who were, if anything, even more beset with flies, he noticed for the first time in detail, the people he was in midst of. And the peacocks.

The peacocks were everywhere—not obtrusively (though it is difficult for a peacock not to be obtrusive), yet everywhere. They were not obtrusive because of the thickly growing trees and brush, but if you happened to raise your head and look at the roof of a snack stand, there’d likely be a peacock on the roof; or in the branches of the larger trees, or on one of the work buildings, or down a path past a sign that read “Closed to the Public,” there was a peacock, this one was a male, with its outlandish plumage, those long feathers with circular tips like eyes and then feathery protrusions from the eyes, in the brightest purples and greens. And another on the roof of the toolshed.

“Oh my god! Look at that cockadoodle on the roof!” This from a white boy of about twelve.

“*Cockadoodle?!?*” This from his father, in his mid-thirties, twisting the word so derisively, his voice full of contempt.

“Uh—uh—*peacock,*” the boy said.

“*Cockadoodle?!?*” The father laughed harshly. And the two walked on.

I am going mad, perhaps, it is mad, perhaps, to want to stop that man and shake him by the shoulders and beg him for mercy—not mercy for myself, I don’t especially need mercy, but just: *mercy*. Let the children play in the shade of mercy.

And as though that had torn a veil, suddenly the voices of the children were deafening. There were, everywhere, children, and it seemed none of them were silent, all were calling, calling, *Mommy, Daddy*, each other’s names, the names of the animals, words in many languages for candies, for bathrooms, for wee-wee, for who did what to whom, for Mommy, for Daddy, it seemed more piercing now than at the lions, and all you heard as English were the white-toned voices and the black-toned voices standing out (because he could understand them) in a sea of Spanish, or rather Spanish-Indian, and Portuguese-Indian, from all over the Americas—they were most of the crowd, two-thirds at least, possibly more, and for every adult there must have been three to five children, sometimes more, and every voice . . . if you stood still, and listened, as James Abbey was now doing, every voice was a different timbre, you could stand and close your eyes, as he was doing, and keep track of every one at once, so many children, by the differences of the timbres, then open your eyes and see them, so many with bags under their eyes, dark circles, circles he knew the meaning of, not enough sleep, not enough good food, too much tension, but eyes so bright, such a terrible amount of laughter, of yelling.

Abbey was dizzy. He sat down on a bench. This meeting place of children and animals, this place where the children are brought to see the animals, this place that is the last refuge of so many of the animals, this place which exists, is supported by the fact that people bring their children to see the last of the wild animals . . . even sitting down he was dizzy. The world was ending here. Right here. Where the children are brought to the animals. This place could exist only by virtue of the fact that the last twenty thousand years of history—perhaps more, perhaps the last twenty *million* years of history—were ending. And the children called to their mommies and daddies, and were happy one moment, and inconsolable the next, as children are, and had no idea; and the mommies and daddies directed and coddled and scolded the children, and were hassled and delighted by turns, as parents on outings are, and had little idea; but every one of the animals knew. Every one. Absolutely. The man James Abbey understood this with every nerve. I thank You for the privilege of this knowledge, he said sarcastically, silently, to something unseen.

Sitting on this bench I cross a certain line. It is as though this bench were a raft, and it has gone a certain distance, crossing a boundary unmarked on the water. This is the line I cross: I do not care any longer whether or not I am mad. I cared when I stood at the gerenuks. I cared when I stood at the lions. I cared when I heard, truly and finally *heard*, the cries of the unknowing children. But I do not care any longer about being mad.

And, thinking this, he was no longer dizzy. He felt his strength return, he stood up with an odd new vigor. And realized: I am the only person here, as far as I have seen, who is not accompanied by other people.

It was true. As he walked, just looking at the people, ignoring the animals (unable in these moments to face *their* knowledge), he realized that almost nobody came to this zoo alone. Today, as far as he could see, he was the only one. Adults bring children; or teens come together—mostly junior high age, the gaggles of teens here and there; or lovers come. Some old people. A few people come together. But now he saw there were many couples. Of varying ages. Some were in their teens. Some middle-aged. Some holding hands. Most, in fact, hand in hand, strolling, stopping a little at one exhibit, a little at another, the way people pause at paintings in a museum, long enough to register them, not long enough really to look—but they go, as it were, to be *among* the paintings, the animals, to walk in the atmosphere of “we are at the museum,” “we are having a day at the zoo,” holding hands, holding hands. “What did you do this weekend?” “We had a nice day at the zoo.” Where the world is ending. A world. And some of the couples look “in love,” as they say, consuming each other, consumed by each other, loving it, each feeding in their soul upon the other’s properties, needing it—such an active, nourishing, exhausting form of delight. The animals understand this. And when each, or one, as had had his, or her, fill? Elizabeth? Did we once look at each other that way, yes, we did, just that way, like those two there, standing by the giraffes but looking at each other with looks of such overwhelming generosity. Ah, Elizabeth, generosity is not mercy. One learns this. Or fails to learn it. Isn’t that so. Let the lovers learn in the shade of mercy.

I don’t want to talk to you anymore, Elizabeth. Nothing personal. It’s only that we’ve reached that place where neither is capable of understanding what the other says—though we’d understand the same things readily from someone else. Elizabeth, Elizabeth—I fear this has nothing to do with psychology. I fear it may be even more basic than that. But don’t worry, I may be wrong, since there appears to be a possibility I’ve gone mad. “Crazy,” was your rather panicky word. And you would say it has something to do with the look in my mother’s eyes when I rode the camel when I was small in the Bronx Zoo, where my mother was as she was nowhere else, where her fierceness took on a strange brightness. But look at all these mothers, Elizabeth, all these children. Your mother took you to the zoo, too, I imagine, of course she did, you spoke of it—and your mother had eyes too, all these mothers appear to have eyes, bright eyes. Let us posit that “because” is a silly word, “because” is a word not worthy of me, not worthy of you, but if we’re going to use such a silly word, even, as it were, for argument’s sake (all our arguments, Elizabeth!): then it (I mean: my condition) is *because* my mother took me to the zoo, *because* it’s *because* ALL do, and we were part of the ALL, of this noisome crowd, *I was that boy right there*, I wanted Eddie to be that boy too, in this raucous procession that would not exist but for the end of the world. A world. It is not simply who touched who, do you see, not simply that mama took me to the ladies’ room to pee, and we in the stall together doing wee-wee, she holding my tee-tee so tenderly, and then sitting down herself, and I had to stay so I wouldn’t get lost, but I got lost looking at the blood swirl down the bowl, and she got so angry that I saw, so upset—to use that young policeman’s word—so upset with me, not angry, the policeman is correct, *upset*, and I had just ridden the camel, and she had watched so proudly, and I have seen so much blood since, Mama, and Elizabeth, so much blood you can’t imagine, enough to know beyond any possible words how every *because* is washed away sooner or later in the unending unstoppable rivers of every person’s and every creature’s blood. How many reasons have to combine into any single reason to make it *the* reason or even *a* reason?

And how arbitrary are those combinations? How silly any reason seems, when, if you follow it up the river of all blood, it leads to nowhere but another reason, which leads to nowhere. Let the reasons rest in the shade of mercy.

Giraffes are better than reasons. Once he had seen a black giraffe. “Melanic” is the word zoologists use: a melanic giraffe. At the Wild Animal Park in San Diego. From the tram that circles that park. And he’d held Eddie up, compact five-year-old Eddie, held him in his strong surgeon’s hands. “Eddie, look! Look at it run!” The black shine of it in the sun, the grace of its stride, and little Eddie caught his excitement, said, “Mommy it’s running!” and Mommy had said, “I didn’t know there were black giraffes,” and Daddy had said, “Neither did I.” They went again a year later, it turned out to be their last visit, and the black giraffe was gone. He’d even dreamt of it a time or two. You cannot forget a black giraffe. Somewhere giraffes are running now; the sign here says they are not “endangered,” merely “rare.” They’ll run a little while yet.

The sign here says that the first zoo ever was the idea of a queen of Egypt, Queen Hatshepsut, worshipper of Isis, three thousand five hundred years ago; and that by order of Queen Hatshepsut, a giraffe was brought one thousand five hundred miles down the Nile for her zoo. Not on the sign, but from his voracious reading and his infernal memory, was that Hatshepsut was the daughter of Thutmose I, and she married her brother Thutmose III, who seized the throne from their father, but it was Hatshepsut who really ruled, and she ruled for decades—and created the idea: *zoo*. “Incestuous patricide,” he said aloud, enjoying the taste of the syllables. Nobody noticed he’d said it, halfway through the fourth millennium of the modest invention of a place that would become the crossroads where creatures would meet us at the end of the world. Their world.

Nobody noticed as he said the slippery syllables again, “incestuous patricide,” after which Queen Hatshepsut left his mind, and he gave himself up to the charm of the giraffes. His mind could not stop chattering roots and reasons to him, but there was a part of himself it chattered to that did not chatter back, the part that had no need of roots and reasons, indeed no belief in them, knowing giraffes are better than reasons.

There were four. An enormous male—the sign said 18 feet high! “One of the strongest creatures in the world.” It is a tribute to that strength, the man James Abbey thought, that we don’t think of them as strong. “They have been known to kick the heads off lions,” the sign went on. The female was perhaps two feet shorter than the male, and there was a young one, a child. A family. (“Look, Eddie, a family,” he said to the five-year-old Eddie of the past.) The giraffes stood at the far wall of the enclosure, where trees and thick bushes hung over, the adults and the young one close together nibbling leaves, the child a little ways down the wall, also nibbling, and each seemed oblivious to the large numbers of people who stopped and stared (or, like the lovers, didn’t stare) and oohed and aahed. Something about giraffes gentled the crowd—they were charmed. And then the female made her feces. A series of neat tidy pellets, surprisingly small, almost dainty, they spurted like little blackish eggs from her anus—an anus (if one were standing near it) at least a foot or two higher than the tallest people in the crowd. And there were titters, and there was laughter—but not derisive; pleasant, really. Surprise and enjoyment, it was even charming to watch giraffes shit.

People started calling his name. They were nearby.

“*James!*” a strong voice called out. A female voice, very sure of itself, casting forth the name with a force of a spear thrust. “James,” a male voice added, not as sure.

“*James!*” the females called again. A mature voice, yet young, perhaps not thirty, “*James!*” He couldn’t make them out, couldn’t even determine the direction—four walkways met at the giraffe’s enclosure, one coming down from an elevation, another rising up, two more from twisty lanes, there was a snack bar and rest rooms, many many people in motion, every sort of person, five races, fat skinny short tall, all in little groups, trying to keep track of each other, many grownups pushing strollers, and in the midst of it, somewhere, “*James,*” one name of many names, now that he was listening for names. Extraordinary how many names people were calling, or simply saying, if you tuned yourself to that, in many languages, mostly Latin, but *English* English as well as American English, and several accents of American English, and Japanese, German, Arabic, Hindi, Hebrew, even American Indian, it was sort of fun, a kind of game, to listen for one’s name in all that, the word one answered to, “*James!*” But now by the sound he knew the caller was no longer coming toward him, had turned, would not come in sight. And he found himself going in the direction he thought or hoped the caller had gone. How long had it been since he’d given himself up to such whims? So he followed his name.

And in response he heard “*Come on, James, come on!*” from the weaker voice, the male turned toward him again; but not by the end of the phrase, by the end of the phrase, the caller was already looking forward. He tried but could not pick them out from all the heads of hair, most shorter than he, most Latin American dark-hairs—the stronger caller might have been that yellow-haired lady down the way, he couldn’t say, passing the elephants, and the elephants looked so sad; no, desolate. They truly looked desolate, in their great concrete pen, smelly, no foliage, a ball and chain—huge ball, thick chain!—around a foreleg of each. And a heavy steel fence between the male and the female. They swayed from side to side. All they could do. Spirits meant to travel in great herds, unchallenged, many miles a day, whose brains were said to be larger than ours, they swayed from side to side at the end of their million years, the very last moments of their million years. He looked about. No one enjoyed watching these creatures. Was he imagining, in the crowd, a sense of respect for the elephants’ immense air of desolation? A parent tried to work up enthusiasm for her child: “See the elephant?!” But the child *did*, that was the trouble—a puzzled little girl who wanted to go on.

But where was his name? He’d lost it. He hurried on.

There were many other names. Nadine, Danny, Jesus, Juan, Maria, Brendan, Esperanza, Rachel, and Asian names he didn’t recognize as names except by the way they were called, and in all that, occasionally, the *James*, and it was as though he were being led by the hand, in a game of names, to teach him *where* his name might be among all the names—a knowledge he had lost so long ago he no longer knew when, no longer even knew if he’d ever had such a knowledge. He felt ever so much younger, listening for his name, hearing it, moving on. And while with one part of himself he understood very well that this was not normal behavior, he was so glad, so relieved really, to be beyond the grips of that very understanding that he had a bright sort of flush that one could only call happiness. There it was again! The sound of his name delighted him. He did not know that he was smiling.

Past the lone Sumatran rhino, collapsed in sleep; past the hippotomi, standing in water—and one hippo, a whitish goo oozed from its eye, collecting at the edge of the socket, and the man wanted somehow to comfort it, but there was no comfort, at least

none that was in his power. “No comfort in my power but the knife.” And he went on toward his name.

There was a stupendous cacophony at the chimpanzees! They were screaming and careening, running this way and that over their great rock with its caves and crannies, bumping into each other, yowling in each other’s faces, hopping up and down in little circles as they cackled, it was a disconcerting din—*almost* scary, just this side of scary, the cries of the chimpanzees seemed to endow them with power beyond their size. And it went on and on, their excitement. The crowd caught it. The children got giddy and made like the chimps, screeching at them, hopping up and down like them doing sudden spastic little runs, and the parents couldn’t get control because they couldn’t be heard above the animals and the children, except for the tiny shrill voice of one little girl pointing at one chimp on a high perch, “He’s looking straight at us! He’s looking straight at us!” While the man James Abbey, the sound of his name lost to him in this great racket, remembered that human beings and chimpanzees share ninety-nine percent of their genes. *Ninety-nine percent of our genes are the same as theirs.* In a normal speaking voice, which could not possibly be heard in that commotion, he said, “The difference between their fate and ours is one percent. One percent of something makes *that much difference.*”

And he pushed his way through the crowd to see if that information was on the sign, and he was offended that it was not. And a keeper came, standing above the enclosure, and she began throwing bananas at the chimps and you wouldn’t think their din could get louder but it did. One percent.

The man walked away in fear. One percent of something? The meaning was clear. The meaning of this was:

Anything.

One percent of any being, any situation, could change. That seems well within the bounds of statistical probability. And if one percent of change could make as much difference as the difference between a human being and a chimpanzee, between the *fate* of human beings and the *fate* of chimpanzees—this means that anything can happen. Anything *at all*. He remembered the words of Kierkegaard: “With God, All things are possible. God *is* All things are possible. All this is possible *is* God.” And it took just one percent. In any given situation, being, world.

He wished he could hear that woman call his name.

Ninety-nine percent of the genes of humans and chimps are the same. God needs only one percent to make *All Things Are Possible*.

Why didn’t the woman call his name, now that he was nauseous with Anything? But now he could hear nothing, not the chimps, not the people. It was all going on in front of him, calming down actually, but he didn’t hear it, hardly noticed it. No wonder Kierkegaard died at age forty-one. How long can you bear the thought that all things are possible?

For if all things are possible, then the world man has made, the possibilities we have chosen . . . are an abomination.

“The life I have made, the possibilities I have chosen . . . are an abomination. A travesty.” James Abbey stood in the midst of the crowd with his eyes open but seeing nothing, speaking out loud. Some people noticed him and edged away; most did not. “I knew this fact, I’ve known it for years, about the genes of chimps and men. Why did I

wait so long to *know* it?” He didn’t notice those who noticed him. He just walked off in the direction he happened to be pointed in, wishing the caller would call his name.

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He stood at the tiger enclosure waiting for instructions. He was certain they would come, though he wasn’t certain what he’d do with them. All the second tiger had given, as yet, were instructions (*Remain, Return*) or the invitation of calling his name.

“I already know my name, thank you,” he said softly. I’d much prefer instructions.”

But he couldn’t see the second tiger. The beast must have been deep in the cave. The first tiger, however—and James Abbey knew the difference, though he couldn’t have said how—was doing he something he thought very odd. The beast was pacing. Far back in the enclosure the Bengal paced back and forth at the rear wall as though in a cage, using only as much space as a cage would allow. A stream of water flowed into the moat from a pipe high on the wall and made a soothing sound that dimmed the construction work banging and clanging somewhere near—work which suddenly stopped, and there was only the water rushing, and the wind in the leaves. In this lull the tiger paused, looked up, then continued pacing, while it glanced now and again toward the top of the wall. It expected or wanted something, obviously, but what?

The children were as excitable today as Sunday, but there were so few of them that their cries and calls were more like birdsong than cacophony. “*Tey-gre*” and “*tee-gee-ra*,” the Latino children said, after they had spotted the pacing beast against the far wall. They left, and then an Anglo child of seven or so came with his parents, and asked, in that oddly formal voice children use to ask a troubling questions, “Why do the tigers like to live there?”

The mother didn’t like the question. You could hear in her voice that she didn’t enjoy saying what she said: the tigers didn’t like it, but that they were here for the zoo.

“Is this the zoo?” the boy asked. He was told yes. “He doesn’t like to live in that place. Why does he?”

“ ’Cause that’s his *job*,” the mother said. The father said nothing. The family left. But Abbey heard in her voice that the mother knew precisely what she’d just told her son. It impressed him, her resolve to answer the boy honestly. For that boy would be changed by this day, and the way he looked at his parents when they went off to their “jobs”—that would change. How long ago had these three been like the other three he’d just seen? Abbey felt badly for them, and in a sad reverie of empathy he no longer watched the tiger, merely stared down into the moat, until he heard the singing.

*Oh Danny boy, the pipes the pipes are calling . . .* A caressing, cracked voice, breathy, holding to the tune gently. A young woman. *From glen to glen and down the mountain side . . .* He was afraid to look up, afraid to look anywhere. *The summer’s gone, and all the roses falling . . .* His eyes were closed now. Though standing perfectly still and straight, he felt lost in a swoon. *It’s you, it’s you must go and I must bide . . .* The

voice hesitated longer than the pause in the song, but when he thought she had stopped, she sang, *But come ye back . . .* She skipped the rest, went to *Oh Danny boy, oh Danny boy . . .* Her voice softened to silence, never singing the last line. He sang it within: *I love you so.*

He knew he had to look at the young woman, but he wondered if he actually was turning toward her as slowly as he felt the movement, it seemed to take so long.

Her green eyes looked directly into his.

“Are you gonna cry again?” she said.

“Excuse me?”

“I saw you when you were standing over by the watchamacallits.”

“Gerenuks.”

He was so startled by her frankness! He felt as though he’s been slapped, but not in anger. A stinging, playful slap.

“I noticed you ’cause you were alone,” she said. “I don’t mean like the photographers, who aren’t really alone, because they’re with their hobby. Or like the sketchers, who get assigned here, you know, for some class, like. You were *alone*. I kind of resented it, you know? ’Cause I like to have this place to myself, being The Alone Person here. Is this gonna become a hangout for people or what? I mean, one or two weirdos is OK, but, you know, like, *one* more and I’m outa here. I mean, they’ll start building condos an’ shit.”

He had to say something in order to breathe.

“Am I—a weirdo?”

“You? *No*. There’s *lots* of old guys hanging around reindeer crying.”

“They’re not—reindeer,” he said. Am I old? he thought. “They’re nothing at all like reindeer.”

“Fair enough. They’re not. OK.”

She was twenty-odd, twenty-three perhaps. Green eyes. Severely cut, dark hair, tinted with henna. It was a Russian kind of look, Eastern Europe, somewhere like that—full lips, strong nose, oval face. The flesh under the eyes was both dark and red. She was too young for that. It was easy to diagnose her sleeplessness, bad food, alcohol probably, probably tobacco too, and given her generation, some drugs. He couldn’t tell about her body; her clothes were dark and baggy, meant to hide her contours. And she wore—and Abbey felt this detail in his chest—the same sort of dark black thick-soled boots that Eddie had worn Sunday. So she was somehow of the people whom Eddie wanted to be. Or, if she was not, then at least they’d had some impact on her.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she said.

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re not gonna call the guy on me, are you?”

“The guy?”

“The attendant—what-you-call-‘em, the zoo guy.”

“Why would I do that?”

“It happened. Somebody thought I was crazy. ’Cause I was singing. Bet they wouldn’t have thought so if I’d been dressed like money.”

“Does singing make you crazy?”

“*Anything* makes you crazy. But I’m not. And I’m a *member*. That surprises them.”

“A member?”

“Of the zoo. I’ve never been a member of anything, but I’m a member of this zoo. To be a member means you belong, right? So I belong here, so I can sing here.”

“Makes perfect sense,” he smiled.

“Oh. You smile. Well, well. Are you a member?”

He thought of all the professional organizations and political committees he had ever been a member of.

“No. I’m not a member.”

“Oh.”

This made her pull back for some reason, so he said quickly, surprising himself, “I may become one, though, I will, actually.”

“Well you should, it’s good for the zoo.”

“I suppose it is.”

“Costs a lot though. Costs *thirty-five* dollars. Do you know how long I have to stand at a cash register for thirty-five dollars take-home? I figured it out, about twelve hours.”

In the same amount of time, James Abbey could make thousands.

“So I had to think about it, you know,” she went on, “ ’cause I only work thirty or so hours a week—they keep us officially part-time so they don’t have to pay any benefits, you know?”

He didn’t know what to say.

“But you have money, don’t you. Good clothes. So you should *really* become a member, you should become one of those fancy members—they have titles for them, but I don’t know them.”

He looked away from her, into the tiger enclosure.

“There’s a second tiger, isn’t there?” he said.

“There sure is.”

“Does it ever come out?”

“Why should it? Where would it go? New Jersey? Hang out at the mall? There’s nowhere it can go.”

“I meant—out of the cave back there.”

“Oh. Sure it does.” Then, darkly: “Don’t think I’m stupid.”

Abbey thought, instead: I’m out of my depth. He said, “Why would I think that?”

“ ’Cause I answered a question you didn’t ask. That’s just a mistake. It doesn’t mean I’m stupid.”

“You’re right. And I don’t.”

“OK.”

They watched the Bengal pace at the far wall.

“Why do you think,” she said, “he keeps looking up at the top of the wall?”

The Bengal stopped suddenly, stared straight at them, gave out a brief throaty growl. They couldn’t help looking at each other with startled eyes.

“What’d *we* do!” she said, and they shared a puzzled smile. Again the breeze lulled, and again the tiger paused and looked around, “He’s thinking *all* the time, isn’t he?”

“Do you sing to all the animals?”

“Only the ones I really like.”

He whispered, not knowing he was whispering: “Why?”

She turned full toward him. And leaning as she was against the fence, her dark bulky clothes, her thick ugly boots, her face so young and weary, her eyes so green, he saw the grace of her that her clothing hid and was meant to hide—how lightly she leaned, how poised was her balance. He realized he liked her enormously. She was quite young enough to be his daughter, it wouldn’t have occurred to him to imagine anything sexual with her. But he was overwhelmed with fondness.

“Was that,” he asked, “a silly question?”

“Pretty silly.” She smiled at him truly for the first time. All the weariness left her face. He smiled back. And they turned again, as though moving to the same music, toward the tiger.

“Look,” she said.

“I see him.”

The second tiger stirred within the shadow of its cave. He moved into the light at its entrance. When James Abbey had asked the young woman if there was a second tiger, he had, again, surprised himself. He had seen the animal two days before, and had heard others talking about the animal. He’d mentioned the beast to her because he needed to. A need that spoke of its own volition. And now, seeing the second tiger while standing by her side, he felt, for the first time in so long, accompanied.

The tiger reclined with its head and paws in the open, its body extending back into the featureless shadows of its cave, so that it seemed that halfway down its back the body somehow disappeared. They stood together simply looking, till the first tiger broke its strict pacing and walked the paths the tigers had worn in the grass of the enclosure. In its movement there remained something preoccupied, disturbed.

“Thinking all the time,” she said again.

Then the beast went back to its pacing place.

“That’s the damndest thing, what she’s doing,” said the young woman. “I followed you, you know.”

“You what?”

“I didn’t mean anything by it. Don’t look so confused. Look—when you’ve been to the zoo a *lot*, you know? When you really come a *lot*—you’ve got to find a way to walk around that isn’t yours. ’Cause you use up all *your* ways pretty fast, you know, a couple-a months, and then this place just becomes, like, a *habit*, you know, and *habits* . . .” Her voice trailed off in such a way as to let him know exactly what she thought of habits. “So I pick a person, and take *their* walk—doesn’t do *them* any harm, right? It’s not like I’m a stalker or something. I just pick an interesting person and lay back behind them and take their walk.”

“And old guys, crying at reindeers are pretty interesting, you think?”

“Gerenuks.”

“Very good.”

“You’re not *that* old—are you?”

“Fifty.”

“Jeeze!”

He couldn’t help laughing and, like anything unused for a long time, his laughter creaked and cracked. They laughed together.

“Jeeze, huh?” he finally said.

“Jeeze is right. But you’re not retired or anything?”

“No.”

“Well, what’re you doing here, don’t you work for a living?”

“Don’t you?”

“Swing shift. Gotta go soon. Don’t you? Work?”

“Sure.”

“You don’t want to tell me?”

“I don’t mind,” he said. But his pause showed them both that he did, and it confused him.

“Let’s put it this way,” she said. “Yesterday, at this very time, you were doing what?”

“I was sticking a small knife into someone.”

“*Goodbye.*”

And she turned and walked away so swiftly it was as though she’d never been there.

The Bengal paced, and the Spanish children said “tee-gi-ra,” and James Abbey stood for he did not know how long. Until the tiger released him from its instruction, he would remain, no matter what the consequences.

“Don’t turn around, OK?”

He made small sound that wasn’t a word.

“You *scared* me,” she said from right behind him. “You don’t *know* how I hate being scared. Especially here.”

“I’m sorry,” he managed to say. “I’m a doctor. A surgeon. It’s just how I—think about it. Knives.”

“Maybe I believe that and maybe I don’t.”

He had no way of knowing if she was actually behind him. No way at all. He very nearly couldn’t stand that.

“Why did you come back?”

“To say goodbye.”

“What’s your name?”

“No way. No way I tell *anybody* my name at the zoo. Especially you.”

“You’re a member,” he said, “they have it written down somewhere.”

“But they don’t connect it to anything. I don’t even connect it to anything.”

“My name is James Abbey. James Abbey.”

“I just came to say goodbye.”

He didn’t know what to do.

“ ’Bye,” she said.

He had the strongest sense that she was standing still as he—if, that is, she was there at all. It never occurred to him to turn around. Somehow there were rules in this. They weren't the rules of the world that called itself "the world," but they were rules nonetheless, and all the more stringent for being the only means of order in a condition that (like any world, actually) had no reference but itself. So he didn't turn around.

But he said, "People who say 'goodbye' generally—go somewhere."

"That's what you think."

Then, after a little while she said, still behind him: "We're *meeting*, aren't we. This is a meeting. We've met now."

"Yes, I think we have. We've met."

"We probably won't forget each other."

"Probably."

"So we've met."

"Now what?" he asked.

She stepped beside him, leaned on the rail, as she had been. Tears of relief came to his eyes. Her eyes were shining, clear, green.

"I gotta go to work soon," she said as though nothing had interrupted them.

"You're a doctor, huh?"

"A surgeon."

"Big bucks."

"Pretty big, yeah."

"I hope we never see each other again."

"Why?"

"'Cause. It's too weird. Even for me. Talking to a guy like you. Tell you what! I'll flip you for who gets the zoo. Tails you stay away, heads I stay away."

"How about I come Mondays, Wednesdays and Saturdays, and you come Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Sundays."

"That leaves Fridays," she said.

"Nobody comes Fridays. Fridays we'll both know the zoo is empty, as far as we're concerned." He felt as though someone else was speaking, the words came so easily.

"Deal."

They smiled at each other—each thinking that the other's smile looked terribly tired.

"I gotta go," she said. "Nice meeting you. Kinda."

"It was nice meeting you."

"That other tiger hasn't moved at all, this whole time," the young woman said.

"I keep feeling it's looking at me. Can't shake that feeling." James Abbey wasn't aware of it, but he was beginning to imitate the girl's speech rhythms.

"Why shake it?" she said.

"I don't know. No reason, I suppose."

She stood straight and extended her hand. He took her hand. It was a strong, warm hand. Her fingers weren't tapered or aristocratic, like his; they were much thicker at the

base than at the tip, and the nails were bitten just a little on each finger, giving them a blunt, almost clumsy appearance. But his knowing hands could feel the strength and physical confidence in hers.

“Mondays, Wednesdays and Saturdays,” she said. “Those are your days, remember.”

Their hands lingered with each other then broke away.

“ ’Bye.”

She walked a couple of steps backwards, taking her leave of him like a lady, and with a small half-smile she turned and walked off, a slightly pigeon-toed walk, in worn, thick boots, her bulky clothes like a cloud around her body.

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