

I'm seven years old. I skip along the pavement, warmed by the sun, my dad at my side. We're at the zoo, my current favorite destination for our weekly dad-and-daughter dates. I love getting to see the giraffes and flamingos I've only ever seen in picture books, having my face painted like a butterfly, riding the carousel on the back of a different animal each time. I breathe in the warm smell of popcorn and hay, pulling my dad towards the gate.

Our first stop is the elephants. They're my dad's favorite. I climb up to the binoculars so I can see their gray and wrinkly skin up close. I watch in wonder as they stomp the ground with their huge, circular feet and use their trunks to grab some hay for an afternoon snack. I can't believe how big they are. One elephant trumpets, and a giggle bubbles out of my mouth.

My favorite animal at the zoo is the snow leopard. I love how pretty its fur is, how it gracefully leaps down from its den, how close its giant paws and large, black eyes come to my little hands pressed against the glass. I watch as it paces back and forth in its glass enclosure and wonder what I should get for lunch.

Our last stop of the day is the carousel. Dashing around the animals, I try to decide which one I'll ride today. I run past the penguins, beetles, and camels, and even the gorilla with a saddle in the shape of a leaf on his hard, shiny back. Finally, I come to a stop at the cheetah. It was modeled in motion, its front and back legs stretched out as if hunting its next meal. I straddle its cool back and grab the golden bar in front of me. Jingly, bright music starts to play as I ride around the ring, slowly at first, and then picking up speed. I begin to laugh, and feel like I could fly right out of my seat. I wave to my dad as I pass him, and cry out with joy.

I'm fourteen now. My little sister has been begging my dad for weeks to take us to the zoo, and he finally said yes. On the ride there, I stare out the window as my sister laughs in the backseat. "Did you hear they're redoing Rocky River park?", my dad asks, a feeble attempt at conversation. It always seems like he's walking on eggshells around me, scared to say the wrong thing. I can only mutter a response, remembering the days when I would spend hours at that park with my best friends, making obstacle courses and playing freeze tag.

By the time we get to the zoo, I'm ready for the trip to be over. My little sister's voice drills into my skull, but I plaster on a smile as she grabs my hand and asks what animals we should see first. I suggest the elephants, remembering the last time I was here, and she smiles and pulls me along.

Did the elephants always look this sad? For some reason, I can only notice the moping way they trudge around, having nothing to entertain themselves but a pile of hay and a large ball of rope dangling from a metal pole. The entire fenced-in arena is doused in muted sepia tones, matching my dad's pants. As my sister peers through the binoculars on tiptoes and peppers my dad with questions, I look towards the dark warehouse at the edge of the pen, and wonder how many elephants get shoved in there every night.

The smell of rotting leaves and B.O. greet me as I step into the snow leopard exhibit. I stare into the glass case, and manage to spot a hint of gray and black cowering in the back corner of a cave. The only other things in the case are a pool of gray water, the surface a slimy green, and sparsely placed wilted plants. The giant cat twitches her tail, and eventually walks over to the glass and begins to pace back and

forth. My sister grins in delight. The leopard's coat is as beautiful as I remember, but her manic pacing puts me on edge. I wonder how long she's been in here, the fluorescent light bulbs standing in for the sun, concrete and rotting wood standing in for the jungle. Suddenly, the familiar sting of tears prick my eyes. I can't be here anymore. Head lowered, I walk out of the dark, damp room, leaving the pacing cat behind.

Our day draws to a close as we begin to make the long trek back to the car. On the way, we pass giraffes, lions, and gorillas, all within their separate fences or large, stone walls. I watch the crowds and crowds of sweaty people surrounding the glass windows, pounding it with their fists. I feel sick. What happened to the zoo since last time? I look around at the same gift shop and the same colorful signs, and hear the same repetitive melody playing over the loudspeakers. The zoo itself is exactly the same.

As we pass the golden carousel echoing a jingling tune, my sister gasps in delight and rushes over. I can see the animals, lively yet frozen in time, each one suspended in the air by a metallic pole. That's how we're supposed to see them, right? Vibrant and perfect and shiny and fake. I remember the first time I rode the carousel, how I felt like I could fly. I wonder if I'll ever feel that again. I see my sister climb onto the cheetah's back, but stay with my dad outside the gate. I know I'm too old for the carousel.