

Zoo Stories

by Alexander Boyd

SMILES ...

Don't smile at a Japanese macaque.

The only people who don't know that are either too young to understand monkeys or too stupid to realize that a monkey launching himself at the glass is a sign of aggression. Youth and idiocy comprise most zoo guests, however.

Maybe that's why the macaques are so angry all the time. Perhaps they're disappointed in how the evolutionary chain has distinguished them from their distant cousins, us. Maybe they think they could do a better job of running the zoo, and they're just expressing the frustration that we would if we were in their situation, being mocked by a knee high kid with an ice cream cone and ketchup all over his face.

ON STAGE

Two dozen musty campers stare up at me. One, the youngest in the group—a six-year-old girl—fiddles with her iPhone until I tell her to put it away. Another is munching on his snack, two hours early. He sees me looking at him and spits a mouthful of half chewed Goldfish crackers back into the bag.

Every morning begins like this. A group of knee-high children staring haplessly up at me. I wish I could've spoken to their parents before they arrived. I would've told them, "Don't promise them fun." They do that. I completely understand why they do. They want a break, so they say anything to convince their children to willingly leave their side at the front gate of the zoo. They want a break from needlessly trying to fill their kids' childhoods with a healthy balance of fun, family, and education; they want to stop performing for the overly dependent, hairless gerbils they gave birth to and get off the stage for a while, to give someone else a turn trying to fulfill their children's every wish. It's not fair to me. Or to the child. Their expectations can only disappoint.

"Promise them a lesson in reality," I want to tell their parents.

I was hired to teach about the animals, about what zookeepers do, about ecology, and about biodiversity. I'm paid to play active, though educational, games with the campers, to tell them something they've never heard before, to show them something they've never seen. To create an environment for them to be social during the summer. To divert their attention while

their parents go on a cruise, sleep in, work, or try to revive their younger, less restricted selves.

To pace right up against the glass so they can see my fur up close and hear my purr, my soft roar, my growl. To swing from the ropes holding up the tent or to yawn so they can see my teeth or to climb up a tree, effortlessly, with just my arms or to dive into the pond and twirl around a fish, snatch it, and tear it apart with my teeth.

Mackenzie—she's eight—says she's thirsty, and I point to a cooler filled with lemonade on the table. She pouts and says she doesn't like juice. She wants water.

'GATORS

Three reasons why American alligators are the perfect predator:

1. The slits in their eyes are bound by gravity; they're always vertical in relation to the world around them, so, no matter what direction they're facing, they can always tell which way is up.
2. They have approximately seventy-five to eighty teeth at once but can possess as many as 3,000 in a full lifetime of fifty years.
3. Their jaws can clamp down with the force of approximately 1,125 pounds, enough to lift a small truck off the ground and, as of today, the strongest jaw pressure of any animal ever measured.

... and one reason humans are still just slightly better.

1. An American alligator's jaw can be held shut by your average eight year-old child.

HAVE A HEART

Between the two elementary-level classes on bugs that I teach on Tuesday, I offer to help Janise, the animal care curator, prepare the animals' diets. When I walk into the grunge-coated commissary, she's just about finished preparing the food for the herbivore, each one a thoughtless mess of vegetables with some chunks of banana and cantaloupe and, if the staff remembers, a few scoops of Vitamin E.

Janise tosses a box of latex gloves at me and tells me, "Haven't started otters or lions yet. Beef is in the tub. The heart's at the bottom." As I pull on a pair of gloves, she indicates toward a light grey bin filled with individually packaged logs of raw beef and loose wedges of the familiar pale cow meat, fat-like but more visibly shaped into ventricles. As I slit open one of the plastic seals, icy drops of blood peck my arms. The stench of raw flesh stains my skin. Later, I'll tell campers I spilled some of the cherry juice on myself.

"Otters get six balls of beef, baseball sized. Make sure to pack a few slices of heart in the center of each one." I break off a lump of beef and then cut apart a few pieces of heart. The dough-like beef helps shape the mixed animal flesh into the round shape the otters'll be looking for. "If they had their way, we'd just toss six full hearts in," Janise said, "but pieces'd break off and get stuck in the drain at the bottom of the pool."

I ate chicken hearts at a Brazilian steakhouse once, cooked mostly. When the server walked over with dozens of them lined on a skewer, I said, "Heart? Yes, please." He slid six off the skewer and onto my plate. When I asked for a few more, he gave me the rest—about a dozen—telling me, "There're whole bins of 'em in the back that'll be spoiled by the end of the week."

They tasted like escargot, same texture and same size but no shell.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

"Look at the hedgehog!" a mother says later in the week. She immediately picks up her glossy-eyed child and balances her on the wooden railing.

I step up beside the two of them and, trying to match the mother's level of excitement, tell them quite audibly, "That's actually a Visayan Warty Pig. Hedgehogs are small enough to fit in the palm of your hand." As a demonstration of the size, I hold my hands together in the gesture one makes when accepting the Body of Christ.

For support, the child holds onto the informational graphic nailed to the fence in front of the exhibit. Her mother lets go of her and she starts to teeter from side to side as she leans farther toward the exhibit. "I didn't know hedgehogs were so big!" she exclaims when she at last spots the Warty Pig camouflaging itself in the mud directly in front of her.

The mother doesn't correct her but instead tells her, "It's just like the one in *Over the Hedge*."

Except it doesn't have quills. And has tusks. And is overweight. I sigh and begin to wonder where the child will be in ten years.

FACT #1: EVERYTHING DIES

I'm speaking to a middle-aged father about our white African lion and the differences between albinism, melanism, and leucism when he asks if polar bears are albino. I tell him they aren't. He proceeds to question me about the polar bear the zoo had in the late 1970s. When I tell him it passed away in the same decade, he expresses his sympathy for our loss and asks, "Did you expect that it would die when you got it?" I immediately pretend I didn't hear the question and begin speaking to a new group of guests. The only answers I could have given him are not entirely truthful ...

He was perfectly healthy and just past his prime. I'm told it came as quite a shock when he died at a mere twenty-six.

... disrespectful ...

You know, it's too bad about that "dying" thing, but, you know, we all do.

... or both.

Actually, we were pulling for eternal life, but it's a proven fact that Christ looks down on polar bears.

INSANITY

Our Purple Swamphens can't fly very well. They're very weak and far too heavy. The male is upset by this, however, so he's been attempting to learn. Approximately once a week he dives off of the highest branch in the rainforest exhibit and hopes for a different outcome.

There are varying results—a fractured wing, a severe limp, a bath in the shallow pool below—but he's never bothered to so much as spread his stumpy wings to slow his drop. Einstein always said that insanity was doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results, but I don't think the Purple Swamphen is insane. I think he's just very regretful and a little self-loathing.

CODE BLUE

Kids go missing nearly every week. The parent will go to the gift shop in a panic, and we'll call a Code Blue and send a group of keepers out to comb the grounds. The parent will tell us that the child ran off somewhere when he or she wasn't looking, but the kid—the more honest and well-mannered of the pair—will turn up about ten minutes later, crying because their mom or dad walked off without them.

This is why I appreciate the thought that some parents put into leashing their children. The action benefits everyone. Keepers can spend their time in the exhibits where they belong. The child always knows where to find his or her parents. And the parents can give a swift tug whenever he or she gets too rambunctious.

HOPE

The cranes have an open-roof exhibit. We found that an indoor enclosure or closed-off sky sent both of them into a depression. I believe a roof, even a simple, netted top, puts them too close to the reality that they can't go anywhere. Their clear and untainted view of the sky gives

them hope, not that they *will* get out, but that they *could* granted a long enough stream of staff irresponsibility—there's a sense of communal trust between them and their keepers.

Of course, we don't remotely trust them to stay put, and they don't intend to resist the temptation to see what lies beyond their walls if they are ever allowed to fly out. Because of this, we clip their wings every few months, trimming down the feathers so they are never full enough for flight. They've never shown any contempt for the vet, Sandy, when she does this. However, we all noticed their immediate uninhibited glee with her during the few times that their feathers were neglected. Once when Sandy went off to Kenya for the winter. Again when her kid had mono and she worked just part-time for over a month and then when we got our albino alligator who stole most everyone's attention throughout the summer, especially Sandy's.

I now anticipate these incidents and, at times, have gone so far as to aid the cranes in their escape when I feel it's been too long since the zoo was featured in the town paper or when work is especially dull. I've changed the date of their last clipping and worked in their exhibit myself in order to keep the rest of the staff away while the cranes secretly stretch their wings and lift off five feet, then ten—closer to freedom each time. Though the keepers sometimes catch the mistake before the cranes can actually fly out, one of them will occasionally manage to escape and get as far as the nearby otter exhibit, leaving his or her mate behind to wish that their feathers would grow as quickly.

It's never a very serious escape of course. Their feeble wings don't have enough practice to carry them more than fifty yards or so. Any of the keepers will intercept the teenager-sized crane somewhere on its stroll to the pond. They'll bear-hug the lost and confused bird and lead it back to an indoor enclosure.

I know the crane feels guilty each time this occurs, having been caught abusing the trust of the keepers, but I also think they'll always have a morsel of satisfaction with their act of defiance.

I imagine the incident from their point of view—struggling to raise their bodies off the ground, flapping vigorously to rise inch by inch, just barely reaching the top of the exhibit wall, landing briefly on the top of the exhibit wall, and descending again into a foreign environment, one they've set foot in before but have done so too long ago to recognize it. Then they're content. What else need they do? If they were to be left outside, they would begin to worry about dinner. Could they fill up on the opened snacks strewn in the area around between trash bins? Will the pond water taste as pure as the water from the hose? Surely not. Doubt fills their minds before long.

I know they're relieved to gain some new perspective. It gives them something to work toward. They can spend the next few months urging their feathers to grow faster. And even just after they're clipped again, guests will mock them on the other edge of wire mesh and I'll pack the mulch especially high in the front corner of the exhibit to give them the advantage of an extra inch or so. And they'll remember that there is a way out—even if it's just for a few minutes.

GRADY THE GORILLA

On Thursday—payday—a guest, probably about eighty years old, asks me where the gorillas are. I tell her that we don't have any and that we never have. She insists that she remembers coming here when she was a child and feeding Grady the Gorilla through the bars. I apologize and tell her that she can go feed the llamas for a small additional fee if she'd like.

CORN

In the early autumn, while the zoo is still fairly busy, we put corn stalks around the llama and goat yard as an attempt at Halloween and fall spirit. Before long, however, we found a correlation between vanishing stalks and the increasing weight of our part-pygmy goat. We moved the remaining corn stalks to another exhibit, but Susie the goat is now mistaken for a young llama fairly frequently. She often tips over and struggles to get back on her stumpy feet. For this reason, we often position a keeper nearby whenever the hay is put out to make sure that she doesn't overindulge.

FACT #2: WE HAVE LIVING THINGS

An elderly couple comes to the zoo every Saturday. They spend most of their time by the picnic tables in their plastic lawn chairs, with lard-rimmed hamburger patties and watered down slushes, rising occasionally to look at the elaborately painted murals of various habitats on the outside of each building.

I'm not sure if they know we have live animals. I've brought different animals around when they're there to give them an opportunity to pet them. They entirely overlooked the tarantulas. The husband—I think he may be deaf—notices the smaller snakes every time but never says anything to his wife. Instead, he seems to be frozen, not in fear but in confusion. Eventually I resort—at a questionably subconscious level, I merely intend to play a cruel prank—to taking out the Peruvian Red-Tailed Boa, an eight foot long, forty pound constrictor, and laying her on the grass so she can get some exercise. As she catches the scent of a squirrel—or perhaps that of the nearby old couple—she begins to sift gently through the grass, raising her head only slightly off the ground.

I ask them if they would like to see the Red-Tailed Boa and, for a moment, both of them look past me and the snake as though they have no idea where my voice came from. Then, they spot my movement as I bend down and run my fingers along the scales of the snake, glimmering lucid shades of blue and purple in the sunlight.

"That's real!" the woman exclaims the moment she spots the thick shape in the grass. She swings her cane to the side as she spins to leave, hitting her husband in the shins, and steps back

up onto the concrete path, rushing away. I attempt to say something before they can leave, but she has already walked off toward a nearby garden and he is limping after her. As she analyzes the different flowers, I hear her ask her spouse, "How did he get in here with that?"

LESSON IN SUPERIORITY

Four reasons why animals are better than people:

1. Snakes only need to eat every week or two. People claim to require three feedings of concessions or fast food slop each day.
2. Snow Leopards can jump up to fifty feet in distance. People refuse to take a running start.
3. A chinchilla's hair is about one sixtieth of the thickness of a human's, allowing for up to sixty of them to grow from each follicle and making it some of the softest fur in the world. People put product in their hair to make it stay in place and make it crunch between their fingertips.
4. Goats eat all day long and rarely get sick; if they do, they'll eat their vomit. Campers puke on the tables three times a week and cry about it.

PELT

We once had a jaguar. We also once had a vet whose hobby was taxidermy. The jaguar died decades ago. And the vet retired almost as long ago.

A jaguar pelt—made into a sort of jaguar-skin rug—showed up one day anonymously given to the zoo with a note: *This belongs to you*. There's never been any question about where it came from.

The pelt is estimated to be worth \$9,000 and is entirely illegal to acquire in nearly any other fashion, so it is naturally valued above nearly all our living animals except the larger mammals. If my boss ever has to choose between me and the pelt, I'm sure I'll be out of a job, but I'll understand her choice entirely.

WISE

De Brazza's monkeys are completely androgynous. Many animals, of course, are, but De Brazza's monkeys are especially so. To most, they appear to be all male because both sexes have beards. Not even respectable female chimpanzees have distinguishable bristles on their chins. But

it gives these primates the appearance of being wise.

I've been in their exhibit on two occasions and both the female and male were stroking their beards in mirrored unison from their platforms above me. They're docile creatures, so they don't wish to do me any harm, but they observe me, wondering why my beard doesn't extend past my collarbone like theirs or maybe they're questioning why it's not white like theirs. No matter what they're thinking, though, they are in deep thought, not wide-eyed in amazement or fear but in eagerness to learn and to study. Perhaps the females stroke their beards because they're looking up to the actions of the males as their societal expectations. Or maybe both males and females have a bizarre facial hair fetish, and it's their manner of submissively pursuing a possible mate. Or maybe they're just picking some food or dirt out of it. No matter, this androgyny doesn't seem to inhibit the De Brazza's monkey society in the slightest.

Why don't our females have beards like these wise creatures? It is a logical question. This quality seems to, in these creatures at least, redistribute any lingering gender expectations between both the males and females. The females are not responsible for looking more prim and proper than the males or even different than them; they are only obliged to look equal to the males as the males are likewise meant to look equal to them. How can this be wise, some may ask? The females should be easily distinguished from a group like birds and people. That way the males, know who to pursue as a potential mate—who to impress.

Or maybe they are truly wise, and we should be following their lead. Female pharaohs had beards in Ancient Egypt, fake of course, to show their superiority to the rest of society. Somewhere throughout the first millennium B.C., however, this practice was lost entirely. It should be revived, should it not, if we want to be perceived as wise like the De Brazza's monkeys? They look down on us somewhat; I can see this when they look at me or at anyone else. They don't respect our nearly hairless women, naked of all equality to men in their eyes.

Our women need beards.

... AND SHIT

Come on in here and smile at me, you bastard, the macaque thinks as a toddler approaches the glass grinning. *I've got a stash of crap that I could smother you in and no one would ever know.* Then he leaps at the glass, rebounding off. He knows he won't get out that way, but the most pleasing part of his day is making ignorant adolescents fall back in startled sobs.

None of them bang on the glass when I walk past. I can tell they despise me as much as they do the children, and I would expect them to. I mean, I talk shit about them right in front of their exhibit.

But it's where our mutual respect comes from. They value shit more than anyone else I know.