

The quietly caged animals seemed like they were concealing some grand secret as I walked past them, not old enough to pity their confined state. They say traumatic experiences are engrained in your memory. I can still smell the feces and artificial plants from that day, blinding us into believing the constructed reality. There is something so peculiar about zoos, the recreation of what was once so untouched and innocent. My mom and I's zoo day was always a highlight of the annual trip to our cousins'.

After our evening stroll in the enclosed oasis, I remember picking out a woven bracelet with a green spider gem from the gift shop. Sitting with my mom on a cold bench outside, gazing up at the hazy yellow sky, my mind drifted into the clouds. Even though I had only lived a mere seven years, I always enjoyed questioning what was older and grander than myself.

"Mommy, how do you think this spider died?"

"What do you mean?"

"Was it stepped on or something? Why isn't it all crushed in my bracelet?"

The frozen spider gazed back at my pure green eyes, almost taunting me to solve its supposed murder.

"Oh. Well. Maybe the spider just died of old age sweetie. Maybe he was a grandpa spider."

"Was he sick??"

"Honey, we all die one day no matter if we are sick or not."

The Earth might as well have opened up and swallowed me whole. For that would not have been as shocking as the information I just received. See before now, I had assumed that as long as I could successfully dodge natural disasters, ax murderers, and any sort of fatal illness, I would live forever.

Now I was forced to face the age old question: What was the point of anything if there was a known end? Everything I knew had a big fat expiration date on it, but I wasn't allowed to know how much time was left. How would I seek my mom's comfort or my cat's warmth or my dad's kisses if I were...dead? I had never been challenged like this, but it would not be the last time.

How dare the world continue on without me!

I became overwhelmed with the idea of a forever that I could never and would never live to see. I felt betrayed by everything I thought I knew.

The next hour was spent in the grimy zoo bathroom, almost as putrid as the animal enclosures.

“I- don’t-get-it,” I whispered through suffocating cries.

“I know sweetie. It’s hard to understand right now.”

“When- I’m - dead - will - I- still - be - able- to - see - you? What- happens-to- my- eyes?”

My mom sighed as I threw up in the toilet.

“Will- I- have- a- phone- to- talk to- you?”

“No, honey we don’t get to take our phones with us when we die.”

I started crying even harder. I remember this distinct feeling of sunkeness. My heart had dropped to my feet and the weight of my new world crushed my tiny shoulders.

I didn’t realize until after, but a long line had formed in the bathroom outside the two tiny stalls. I can imagine the concerned mothers silently standing, waiting with their confused children, covering their pure little ears.

“If Sister Janis is right about God, then I hate Him for letting this happen to us.”

“Well your teacher is a very serious woman who believes-”

“I HATE GOD I HATE GOD I HATE GOD”

I continually dry heaved over the toilet, as if trying to expel this new information from my being. This anxious reaction would carry on many years into the future, but this was the first time I’d experienced it. My regretful mother stroked my back, frantically trying to comfort her daughter. No lesson in motherhood could have prepared her for this.

After that trip to the cousins was over and we were back home, the following months were filled with sporadic outburst of disbelief as my little body tried to comprehend its own eventual demise. Whether it was sparked by a song or a movie or a fight with my sister, the idea that these meaningful things would one day disappear was unfathomable. One of the parts that bothered me the most was that I would probably mean nothing to the generations after me. I was jealous and almost angry at these theoretical future people that got to live when I would not be allowed to. Longing for a life that wasn’t mine to live, I was wasting away my own with this time consuming dread. An unchangeable but nevertheless frustrating reality I would have to accept.

It took me a while to realize life is just a series of shattering and rebuilding the world you believe you live in. I remember that was the year we made the “visit the cousins” trip during Christmas. The same Christmas I found out Santa Claus wasn’t real. Tragic, I know. I definitely had my doubts beforehand, but this trip confirmed my suspicions. The grey light from the window crept past my roll out bed and exposed “Santa Clause,” as she tip toed around our small suite.

I always had a hard time falling asleep as a kid. My mind would overload with thoughts I didn’t want and songs I didn’t even remember hearing until I wanted to explode. Sometimes I would lie there for three or four hours until the sky was vaguely yellow and I realized I was screwed for the rest of the day. The next morning, I woke up and pretended like nothing happened. I felt as though it was my Duty as the Oldest Child.

Ellie and I had always bonded as the oldest children. Together we founded the Oldest Cousins Club, and we were quite proud to be its most esteemed (and only) members. One day at breakfast, she was wearing a bright yellow Sesame Street t-shirt. Yellow was her favorite color. I always thought it was strange she liked Sesame Street so much.

The one thing I always tell people about Ellie is that she had her own language. She would combine words or phrases into new creations, as if forming a new reality for herself. It was all fun and games until one day she decided to smush together “fire” and “truck.”

“You like French toast?” I asked, trying to find some common ground. *That was stupid. Obviously, she likes French toast. She’s eating it,* I thought immediately. Thankfully, Aunt Debbie, sporting a bright pink blouse with a purple and green striped shirt underneath, chimed in by saying, “Yes, we looove French toast. Don’t we Ellie? Did you say thank you to Aunt Susan for breakfast?”

Ellie continued to pour globs of thick syrup on her plate without even looking up to acknowledge my question or her mother’s. She would take a bite of her breakfast, reach for a crayon in the rainbow pile next to her, then take another bite of toast. I hardly ever remember seeing Ellie without a pile of crayon wrappers next to her. I used to be convinced she was going to be a professional crayon unwrapper someday. The first of her kind.

“So...um... are you afraid of dying?”

No one said anything.

If you listened close enough, I swear you could hear the crayons screaming in terror as my cousin undressed them. Assuming nobody understood my question, I pressed harder.

“I mean I don’t know what it’s like to have cancer, but it seems scary.”

It's hard for me to understand now that I genuinely thought I was making casual small talk. I was simply seeking comfort and companionship in my own fears. I thought that this topic would be common ground for us, something we lacked. We were both eight, but she was never really interested in the things that I was.

Once again, Aunt Debbie and her blindingly colorful outfit smoothly swooped in with, “Oh well, we don’t really talk about that. Especially if we have this artisanal French toast to rave about! Susan, you have to tell me your secret.”

My aunt always fascinated me. I never understood how she lived as she did knowing what she knew. Nevertheless, she was and is the most positive person I know.

Aunt Debbie fluttered out of the dining room to “rave” about breakfast in the kitchen, and I was left alone with Ellie. I suppose when your eight year old daughter has been diagnosed with a fatal disease, you need to simply rave about “artisanal French toast” once in a while.

Ellie had mastered a skill I obviously lacked, choosing her words carefully. I guess she had had a good amount of practice. In some ways she was my mirrored image, and was forced to conquer all the fears I held in my heart.

Ellie looked up at me for the first time in between crayon and toast and whispered very calmly,

“Only sometimes,” and shrugged a little.

I nodded, satisfied with a response, and we both continued to eat.

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Nine was a strange year for me. I was a little ball of anxiety and self-consciousness, wrapped up chaotically in Paul Frank tees and turquoise gauchos. Countless pictures have been ruined by my tie dye knit ponchos or peace sign suspenders, surrounded by little girls in pastel smock dresses and white bows. I think I just wanted to be seen, to appear alive and thriving. I wanted to be loud, something I am not and have never been.

One day during that year’s visit it snowed. A lot. If you did not already know, snow is very important to Southern children, and a Wisconsin snow storm is quite dramatically different from a Tennessee dusting.

My sister and I rushed outside past our cousins’ chicken coop into the frozen glitter. I remember someone threw a huge snowball right in my eye. I immediately started to cry. Aunt

Debbie heroically took me inside in her Captain America t-shirt and comforted me as if I had been hit by a bullet. That is why she is amazing. No problems are ever too small for her. I slowly walked up the creaky old stairs, fully prepared to accept the vast amounts of pity I deserved from the rest of my family.

My Aunt Debbie, my grandmother, and my mother sat around whispering, trying not to wake Ellie. I had been in her room before, but not many times. The walls were bright yellow and covered in drawings and Sesame Street posters and crayon wrappers.

Years later I would lay awake on the floor of her room, feeling severely out of place and intrusive on my blow up mattress, stifling my tears.

The three women sat around my cousins bed while she slept, her eyes only mostly closed. Ellie was simultaneously a reflection of everything I wanted to be, and everything of which I was so afraid. She was loud and fearless and comfortable with herself. But now, she was quiet. I sat down on the ground in front of my mother as she stroked my hair. My aunt did the same by Ellie's bed.

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Whenever we were on the long road trip to my Aunt's, I'd choose a stick on the ground or a leaf in a tree and try to focus on it as we whooshed by. I would imagine it there hours or days later, existing alone in the dark. It always made me weirdly sad that I wouldn't see that stick or leaf or tree again, but that it would still be there long after we'd gone.

Kings of Leon blared in our monstrous Toyota Sequoia as we made our way through rural Kansas. The windmills towered over us, creating intimidating shadows that guided us down the empty highway we'd been on for what felt like a lifetime. It was my turn to sit in the front seat, and I sat staring out the window, pretending like I was a movie character on a journey. Subconsciously separating myself from the reality of my situation. As ten year olds might do.

I used to always complain about the constant queuing of my dad's Dad Music.

"Look at all the windmills guys," Dad said over "Sex on Fire," an unusual but classic road trip anthem for our family.

"I am closing my eyes!!!"

My little sister laid completely flat in the way back. Her and my dad had been bickering the whole time. A cross country road trip will do that to any family.

"I can see yellow."

Sophia had been closing her eyes so tight she began to see colors. This is a perfect representation of her constant innocent rebellion.

“Aw man. Don’t be like that. Seriously Sophia?”

“Yes, I am seeing yellow and it is prettier than your windmills,” she exclaimed with a twinge of guiltless confidence.

Mom could no longer contain her laughter. It rushed out of her in a gust as we whooshed by more windmills.

“I don’t understand why we have to go to Aunt Debbie’s every year the drive is so long,” my sister innocently whined.

“I know, honey. It is just something we need to do.”

At that point Sophia was about to gouge her little eyes out. I looked back to see her feet, in my face, crossed and covered in monkey socks. There was a period of time after my mom told her she was born in the year of the monkey that it was rare to see her without at least one monkey themed clothing item on. I guess it could have been worse. She could have been the year of the rat or ox, animals more difficult to come by in the kids clothing section.

“Why couldn’t they just come to us?”

“We need to be there for them. It’s hard for them to leave their home, especially now.”

My mom’s laughter slowly subsided. The Kings of Leon song finally faded away. I watched the dead yellow grass outside blur together as I continued along my fantasy. I looked at every windmill and every yellow strand of grass that whooshed by, doing my best to separate each individual moment from the blur.