

“Ani-Mall”

She wanted to go to the Amazon, but her mom wouldn’t let her. Instead, the two of them crossed to the lobby, rode an escalator up, and took a hard left into Africa. It was hot and muggy there – lights along the ceilings blasted the heat, and a canister above sprayed a musky scent. Kids, some around seven or eight like the girl, and some younger, swarmed the whole area with their exhausted parents barely clinging onto to their small hands. The mom and the girl passed a few Ani-guides with drooping lizards and colorful birds perched on their arms, but they didn’t stop to listen to their programmed messages. The mom steered the girl towards the predators.

There, predators were in small, plastic enclosures that were open at the top so people could lean over and pick their favorite. In one enclosure, lion cubs pawed at a woman’s hair and chewed a little kid’s lost teddy bear. In the next, there were hyenas that yipped and snapped at hands. In another, two leopard cubs slept on a fake tree branch. Kids were packed over in the corner of the store dedicated to African Wild Dog puppies, all of them fighting to lean over the enclosure and let the puppies lick their fingers. The girl’s friend has two African Wild Dog puppies, but the girl always thought they looked kind of scary.

The mom paused by the cheetah enclosure. No one else was there but a small boy drawing in a notebook. There was only one cub, lying limply in the dust. The black tip of its tail twitched, and its eyes were closed. A sign above it said FEMALE CHEETAH – SILVER. The girl knew by the signs around Africa that SILVER corresponded to \$6,500 and above.

“What about a meerkat?” The girl asked, cognizant of her mom’s low budget. An enclosure behind them had dozens of the pups chasing each other in and out of pre-dug holes.

“It’ll tear up the yard.” The mom tapped her finger on her lip and looked around the store. “Let’s try Clearance.” The girl followed her through the aisles of enrichment, toys, treats,

and grooming tools to an adjacent store where a few dark animals were in large, closed cages. A couple of mongooses peered at the girl and the mom as they passed, swishing their tails across the grass in their cage. There were four impalas, a dusty rhino, a zebra missing part of one leg, and a shivering, brown buffalo calf. The calf only had one horn.

"I don't like it over here." The girl clutched her mom's arm. They walked close to each other in the narrow space until they reached the final cage. Five baby giraffes were crammed inside, pacing in rapid circles and bumping their necks against each other. One of them lay in a corner of the cage, narrow legs folded under him. As the mom and the girl approached, his leaf-shaped ears perked at them, and he blinked his long, black lashes.

One of the Ani-Mall employees walked up to them in a corporate-rented green polo and plastic safari hat. His nametag had the number 27336-92 in boldface above his name, Dale, in tiny font. Dale smiled a smile corporate had taught him to smile and said, "I see you folks are interested in the giraffes. We've got a big sale going, right now." He tapped a corporate sign above the cage that said BUY ONE GET ONE 25% OFF. "It's a great deal."

"One would be just fine." The mom tapped the girl's shoulder. "What do you think honey?" The girl walked up the cage and squatted down next to the giraffe lying down. He blinked black eyes the size of her fist and looked away.

"I want *him*," she shrilled.

Dale checked them out at the corporate cashier, and despite his advice, the mom got the Bronze KareKit so she could afford a GPS collar too (batteries not included). The KareKit came with a month's worth of food, grooming tools, a book of giraffe facts, giraffe stickers and keychains, and emergency sedatives in case he got too out of control.

The final bill was \$3,650.

Dale, along with a coworker, carefully strapped the giraffe's cage in the back of the mom's truck, part of corporate's new customer service initiative. As the girl waited, she watched the protestors – a group of men and women in raggedy white coats who shouted at everyone who entered or exited the Ani-Mall. The girl couldn't read their signs from here. She had heard on the news that there were protestors placed at every Ani-Mall in all fifty states. According to the news, one group had even set fire to a construction site in Colorado. The entire Appalachian department had been lost with one match.

With a thud, Dale and his coworker jumped down from the truck and each shook the mom's hand. She gave them a few dollars in tips and waved them off. They pocketed the tips before anyone from corporate would see them, and the girl climbed into the back seat, and the mom got in the front seat.

Their house was a short drive away, and it was a nice, sunny day in June, the perfect time to go outside. Along the sidewalks, there were dozens of kids walking their Ani-Mall purchases. One little girl had her panda bear cub in a pink stroller. Another had a lynx on a leash. A teenage boy tugged on a stick with an elephant calf. There was an orange lemur on a boy's shoulder as he walked a big white lemur. The little girl knew she would have to try to walk her giraffe tomorrow.

"What are you going to name him?" The mom glanced at her through the rear-view mirror.

The girl chewed her lip and thought of the giraffe's dark eyes and the dark coarse fur on his neck. "Julian," she said. It seemed sophisticated, dark. She knew a kid named Julian once. His family used to buy bobcat kittens every year until Julian's brother lost his left hand to one of them. Then they started getting fish instead. Fish you could keep forever.

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The next morning, the girl lay on her stomach in the grass, flipping through the KareKit giraffe book. Julian was still in his cage, standing with his stocky bottom pressed against the wire even though the door was open. He had never seen grass before, and he wasn't quite sure what to make of the green prickly stuff. The girl paused on page twelve and held it in place with a finger. It had a picture of a giraffe's body with textboxes attached to arrows that pointed to different features, one of which pointed at the head:

Giraffes do not have horns as most people think. Both the females and males have **ossicones**. **Ossicones** are made of cartilage like a human ear and are covered in skin. Giraffes are born with their **ossicones** flat against their head..

The girl peered at Julian and observed that his ossicones were upright and had a tuft of black hair on top. His lips were thick and pouting, and his warm, brown spots were numberless until they faded to white on his spindly legs. His tail was mostly white with a handful of black hair at its tip, almost like a paintbrush. The girl left the book in the grass and slowly walked towards Julian, making shushing noises as she approached. The giraffe, in turn, recognized the shushing noise as the noises the mongooses made with their tails or the shushing of his companions' necks as they brushed each other when they paced. The giraffe did not like this sound. He clattered out of the cage on the unfamiliar green prickles and galloped around the yard until the shushing noise ceased.

The pages of the KareKit fluttered.

The girl, of course, remembered a phrase she had passed over in the KareKit: "Let your giraffe calf explore their surroundings."

The giraffe didn't understand his new surroundings, nor did he care to explore them. He wanted to know where the other four giraffes were and whose offspring this was. The girl stayed a reasonable distance away, watching Julian's head swing around, like one of those big movie cameras. Then, the girl walked towards him. The giraffe had seen what the humans had done to the buffalo, and he did not stay close enough for the offspring to touch his flank. He galloped to the other side of the yard and moved every time she got close until she gave up. With a sigh, the girl picked up her KareKit book and returned to the house to see about dinner.

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They continued in this way for several months. The girl in the grass, looking longingly after the giraffe as he ate his food, drank his water, or just stood there, not looking at her. The giraffe stood in the grass, waiting and listening for his companions. He had started to forget the feeling of another's giraffe's face against his. The girl had begun to think she would never touch Julian. The mom wouldn't let the girl get another animal or return Julian. She told the girl to keep trying. The girl waited and tried everything in the book and online, but he never let her get close. The mom tried to see the positive; Julian was never aggressive towards the girl. The girl had only heard him make a noise once, when she was lying awake in bed after a vicious nightmare. There was a sort of low hum outside. When the girl peeked through her curtains, she saw Julian with his head over the fence humming. Every few minutes, he would stop, perk his ears, and then start again. For hours, he went on.

There was nothing in the book about that.

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When the giraffe turned one, as corporate's records estimated, he was eleven feet tall. The girl still had never touched him, and she wouldn't have another opportunity. Today was his

last day with them. That morning, she gave him a massive pile of the freshest leaves and twigs the mom could afford and put one of the giraffe stickers on her shirt. The mom fed him a light sedative and, with the girl at her side, crowded him back against the fence until they could swing a rope around his neck and nudge him forward. They led him down the road to the Ani-Mall. He had long since grown too large for his cage. The giraffe followed the human and her offspring languidly, vaguely hoping they would take him to his companions.

They took the giraffe around the back of the Ani-Mall to the Returns and Exchanges Department where there were two lines – one for sedated predators that needed to be loaded right away, and one for prey that came willingly. The line was unusually short for a Saturday morning, and the mom and girl walked right up to an Ani-Mall employee.

The employee there was named Dale. His badge number was 63372-29. He was not the same Dale as before. This Dale wore corporate-rented black coveralls. He lifted a corporate clipboard and smiled a smile corporate had told him to smile. “Welcome to Returns and Exchanges, ladies. How can I help you today?”

The girl cried silently.

The mom stepped forward, but the giraffe stayed where he was, peering at the offspring. “We are here to return our giraffe. He is of age.”

Dale noted the mom’s information on his corporate clipboard with a corporate pen. “Any illnesses, behavioral problems, or incidents?”

“No.”

Dale clicked his corporate pen. “Great. An associate will be with you shortly.”

The girl and the mom walked past Dale and sat in the waiting area. There was a boy with his father on a bench across from them. The boy had buried his face in the fur of a wide-eyed

pine marten while the father was staring at his phone. The giraffe looked around and didn't see his companions. The sight of a lion in a cage a couple hundred feet away instinctually made his shoulders twitch and his legs shift, but the lion did not move. The giraffe cautiously bent his head to look at the offspring instead. She was shaking and crying. He lowered his head to the offspring's shoulder and nuzzled her salty cheek with his long, black and purple tongue, something his companions used to do to him when he was anxious or afraid. She jumped and looked at him, but his head was already seven feet above hers. He blinked his long lashes and looked away as he swung his jaw, the sharp taste of her tears exotic to him.

The mom and the girl waited thirty minutes for an associate, not named Dale, to come for Julian. The Ani-Mall employee gave the girl a lollipop in the shape of a giraffe she later threw away and took the rope from the mom. He led the giraffe away, and Julian's long legs loped through nothing on empty asphalt.

The girl tried to believe her mom when she said that Julian was going to a good place. The commercials said adult animals went to zoos around the world where they lived with other members of their species and were given the best care possible. *The Last KareKit They Will Ever Need!* – the signs said. The protestors said they were loaded into semi-trucks, taken to warehouses across the country, and slaughtered.

The girl really wished Julian could go to Africa. She had once seen an old picture of wild giraffes in a textbook from the 2020s. They were grouped around a thicket of acacia trees, their bodies a few feet from each other, tongues lolling to reach into the leaves, and eyes black and bright.

No one could touch them there.