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Slaughterhouse Zoo: A Novel

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Slaughterhouse Zoo

A Novel

By
Sean Martinez

An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for Graduation from the
Western Oregon University Honors Program

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Abstract:

The relationship between animals and humans has always been complicated. Today, society uses zoos as a method of protecting endangered species while also educating people about them. While zoos do a lot of good for preserving animals, there have been instances in the past of some zoos unintentionally, or intentionally, harming them. Therefore, I wrote *Slaughterhouse Zoo*, a novel that will explore themes in animal rights, acceptance of change, and morality. The novel features protagonist Dylan Alderbridge, a passionate animal lover who is also cynical towards people, as he becomes suspicious of the Nirmala Zoo's intentions. He aims to get to the bottom of his speculations and take down the corrupt zoo from within by becoming an intern. He later discovers that the zoo has been mistreating and abusing its animals. Through this fictional story, I hope to shine a light on misunderstood animals, as well as show how zoos can be crucial to helping people understand animals better.

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Chapter 1: The New World

So much can change in five months—it never ceases to amaze me. You see, last July, before I left to study marine biology in Hawaii, I sat upon this hill and looked down on a small but wonderful beach town. If you ever find yourself driving through the Pacific Northwest, along the coastal highway, you’ll eventually drive through Nirmala—an isolated town nestled against massive foothills on either side.

The town was so small, it’d take twenty minutes to walk from one end to the other. Besides, the real traffic wasn’t on land, it was out on the bay or out at sea. Nearly everyone owned a boat. People got up bright and early, trying to be the first ones on the water to catch their limit on crabs, clams, oysters, and fish. I was never one for the sport—or capturing animals for that matter—but at least the people in Nirmala went out to put their own food on the table.

“Well it’s official,” Quinn said while looking through binoculars. “There are more cars than there are boats on the water.”

I looked out in the distance—over the treetops, over my house, over the whole town: I could only see about five or six black blots on the water. Things on land looked very different. What once was a simple town was now littered with wood planks and strips of yellow caution tape. Every other block seemed to be an abandoned construction site. The roads were a congested mess, thanks to the traffic light installed at the big intersection on the highway. Echos of honking horns reached the top of the mountain, where Quinn and I sat.

“It looks like a second-rate Cambrian explosion,” I said, shaking my head.

Having just flown in the night before, I hadn't had a chance to see the new Nirmala. But Quinn offered to show me. We had stumbled upon this trail as kids, and since then, the view from the top of the mountain had always been one of my favorites. We used to drag each other out of bed early in the morning to watch the sun rise over the hills, creating a shimmering surface on the bay. Hardly anyone knew the trail existed, and it's better that way. It's much easier to appreciate the view without a hundred others pushing and shoving and disrupting the tranquility.

"Here," Quinn said, handing me the binoculars. "See for yourself."

Removing my warm fingers from my gloves, I looped the binoculars over my head and gazed through them. I inspected one of the many construction sites. There were tall mounds of excavated dirt, drilled holes in the street filled with muddied rainwater, and blue and brown tarps half-concealing other random supplies. I frantically scanned the town for some of the main landmarks I relied on. I spotted my house amongst the other frost-covered rooftops. I really didn't like the modern look of the new houses, the three-tiered rooftops with steel balconies. It made the neighborhoods feel disjointed. I looked over at the far side of town where there used to be a massive eagle's nest—which was no longer there.

"When did they take out that Douglas fir?" I asked.

"Oh, that's relatively new," Quinn said, knowing very well which tree I was talking about. "Happened maybe a month ago."

"Man," I muttered to myself. I whipped the viewfinder over to the crowded highway. There was a glowing, animated billboard that had a picture of a polar bear and read: *Come visit the Nirmala Zoo. Weekdays 10-5.* It made me miss the little things like

the paper hanging off wooden billboards at night; and the standard beach houses that didn't look too modern; and the squirrels that leapt out of piles of leaves like a pod of dolphins. Had I known everything was going to change, I wouldn't have taken my last days here for granted. A heads up would've been nice. But then again, maybe I wouldn't want to know.

I pulled my eyes out of the binoculars and handed them to Quinn.

"Hey," Quinn said reassuringly, "you're only here for Winter Break—that's a month, right?"

"Right," I replied dryly.

"Then you'll be fine. That gives you time to warm up to it all. And, if you still don't like it, you can go back to tropical beaches and your virgin daiquiris."

Not really paying attention, I crouched beside a mossy alder. "Why're they expanding everything?" I asked, trying my best not to sound dejected.

"I think it's because of that new zoo that opened," Quinn said, stashing the binoculars in his bag.

I rolled my eyes. "Right, you mentioned that."

"Yeah, people have been going nuts about it. People are saying it's gonna put Nirmala on the map or something like that."

Unzipping his jacket, he laid it over the dewey grass and sat next to me.

"Jaylee, Zoe, and I haven't even seen it yet," he said. "Which is weird. We're probably the only locals who haven't at this point."

"What have they been up to?" I asked.

“The usual—oh, well Zoe got promoted at the candy shop. But other than that, Jaylee’s been busy travelling with her family.”

I hadn’t talked to Jaylee or Zoe since I left for Hawaii. They’re poor conversationalists, which is partly why I hadn’t reached out to them myself. Quinn was the only one who really kept in touch with them after we graduated from Wheeler High.

“You reckon we should start heading down?” Quinn asked, checking the time on his phone. “We got less than fifteen minutes.”

Suddenly, I felt a little better. “That won’t be a problem,” I smiled, getting on my feet. “You got your timer ready?”

“It’s ready when you are.”

We’d scaled this mountainside for nearly a decade; it was pretty much our backyard. Despite being away for some time though, I was still pretty nimble on my feet, weaving around blackberry bushes (for the most part), leaping over tangled roots, and baseball sliding the steeper inclines. The ground leveled out, and Quinn and I were at a sprint. We hurdled over fallen logs and branches, not knowing where our feet would land amongst the concealing shrubbery. We kept running until we burst through the thicket, our feet hitting a grass soccer field.

“Did you clock it?” I huffed, turning back to Quinn, who hit the field mere seconds after me.

“Been a hot minute, but you pulled out eleven minutes and fifty seconds,” Quinn panted, shaking his head. “You’re slowing down.”

“Have you beaten my time yet?”

Quinn smirked. “Eleven ten.”

“Damn you.”

All I escaped with, in the end, were minor scrapes and a couple blackberry stickers on my wrists, which was completely normal. You rarely left the mountain unscathed.

The only thing I didn't anticipate was how muddy I'd be from the descent. My hands and shoes were caked in dirt. Not the ideal look before seeing old friends for the first time in almost half a year. I emptied some loose rocks from my shoe, and wiped my feet in the wet grass. We walked towards my house and saw a silver Tesla parked perpendicular in the driveway. I didn't recognize it, but I knew exactly whose car it was.

“Dylan!” Jaylee and Zoe said in unison as I opened the door.

“Hey guys,” I said, not directed at anyone in particular. I didn't know how long Jaylee had the car, but the black leather seats still held that new car smell. The inside was also very warm, instantly thawing my numb red nose.

“Happy birthday, Quinn,” Jaylee said, as he followed me in.

“Thank you,” Quinn replied.

“Oh shit, happy birthday,” I said passively.

“Really?” Zoe said, exasperated. “You forgot again?” I was always forgetting the smallest things.

“Thank you, Dylan. Much appreciated,” he chuckled, wiping a muddied hand on my shoulder.

“Oh god, you guys are filthy!” Zoe exclaimed.

“Use the goddamn towels,” Jaylee remarked, frantically tossing two more towels into the backseat.

I looked down and saw bits of mud scattered across the black mat of the car. Jaylee made me pick them up one by one and throw them outside.

“Did we decide what we’re doing?” Jaylee asked from the driver’s seat. Quinn and I stayed silent, for we knew Jaylee already had a plan—regardless of whether or not we all wanted to do it. We waited for about two seconds before she said, “I was thinking, now that we’re all together again, we could check out the Nirmala Zoo.”

Just my luck.

“Yeah, that’d be great,” Zoe said. “I haven’t seen it yet.”

“Can’t say I have either,” I said grudgingly. But Jaylee had already started the car, and we were coasting down the street towards the busy highway.

Chapter 2: The Zoo

We didn't even reach the end of the road, and I already wished I stayed home. But it was too late to back out. Mainly, I didn't want to disappoint Quinn on his birthday, so I gritted my teeth.

By the time we got to the zoo, it was already packed. The line to enter the zoo curved around the corner with the sidewalk. Parking was a nightmare, but Jaylee found a pretty good spot near the exit.

We got in line and so began the long wait to get in. No one said anything for a while; Jaylee and Zoe were only interested in what was on their phones. It was always very hit or miss with Jaylee. Either she'd have her nose down on her phone the whole day or she'd be so talkative you couldn't get her to shut up. And sometimes you got the full dose of both sides. At least I had Quinn to talk to. I was always closer with Quinn; we were friends before we entered Wheeler High School.

"Oh yeah, Dylan," he said. "Guess what Zoe and I saw last week?"

"What's that?"

"Oh we saw an owl," Zoe interjected, looking up from her phone.

"What?" I said, suddenly interested. "Really? What kind of owl was it?" Even though I knew Quinn brought it up to engage us all in a conversation, I was too invested to care about falling into the trap.

Quinn threw his arms up. "No idea, but it was sitting up in a tree."

Whenever Quinn and I hiked to the top of the mountain, my eyes were always scanning the forest canopy or the ground, but we never saw one. We heard them from

time to time though. Now, with all the loud construction, it seemed I'd have better luck finding a pueo in Hawaii.

“Man, first Jaylee, now you two,” I groaned. “How am I the only one who hasn't seen one?”

“You'll see one eventually and it'll be worth it,” Quinn said reassuringly, to which I gave a half-hearted nod.

We seemed to move three steps forward with every passing minute. Penguins would've made better progress. It might've taken us almost an hour to reach the gate, but it felt shorter with Quinn. When we got up to the front window, we each paid for our individual tickets: \$25...good lord. The lady gave us stamps and I stepped foot inside the Nirmala Zoo for the first time.

And because it was December, the zoo screamed 'Christmas' on virtually everything: the trees, the buildings, the lampposts—I wouldn't have been surprised if the goddamn animals wore Christmas sweaters. So, right away, things were off to a wonderful start.

Holiday decor aside, I had to admit that the Nirmala Zoo had a breathtaking appeal. There was a large gift shop on one side, a concession stand on the other, and a wide open space down the middle—though it didn't feel very open. Up ahead, a horde of people gathered below a giant map, straining their necks to see all the attractions.

I didn't realize how massive the zoo was until I was staring at the map. There were six main biomes with multiple sub-exhibits. It was very overwhelming—even Jaylee had to put her phone away to comprehend the monster of a zoo. It would've taken

us ages to formulate a route, had it not been for Jaylee who seemed to have it figured out already.

“Let’s do Amazon Boulevard first,” she declared, as if she’d been here before. No one opposed. I was just eager to escape the swarm of people. Someone was constantly touching my arms and shoulders, and I kept getting shoved off-balance.

There were so many overlapping conversations happening at once too. I heard one woman exclaim, “There’s penguins in Africa? Isn’t it too hot for them?” Another person barked, “No I am not paying \$15 for you to poison yourself with sugar.” It sounded like they were screaming in my ear. I wish I didn’t have to hear what people had to say, but when they’re so close, it’s impossible to ignore.

The first animal we saw was a bighorn sheep—who thankfully, wasn’t wearing a Christmas sweater over his tan coat and curved horns. He was in his own secluded exhibit, standing atop a rocky outcrop. Stoic and unfazed by the dozens of people staring at him, his chiseled face tilted towards the sky. I wanted to stop and look at him a little longer, but we had to push on with the flow of people.

We approached the first intersection that branched off in three directions, along with three different signs. One had a narwhal’s tusk aimed left towards Frozen Frontier; another had an elephant’s trunk pointing up, leading straight to Africa Adventure; and the narrow snout of an anaconda pointed in the direction we wanted to go.

The coastal winter air melted away and it got more humid and moist. The palms of our hands felt sticky as we walked down the tunnel to Amazon Boulevard. A musky odor

filled our nostrils as we entered a dark room which felt like a cave. The ambient sound of trickling water resonated from the speakers embedded in the fake rock walls.

The first animal we set our eyes on was an anaconda, its aged, moss green body coiled up, confined as it could be in the corner of the tank. I presumed it would eventually get bigger. People tried to take pictures but they weren't coming out very clear: all they got were reflections of camera lenses and people looking in. And despite the signs specifying not to use flash, the place was a strobe light festival. It didn't take much for my eyes to get dizzy and my head to spin. I couldn't imagine how the snake felt.

I moved on to the neighboring tank: this one, a bit bigger, had a small caiman. It floated motionless in the middle of the water, its snout barely surfacing and limbs spread apart. Quinn, Jaylee, and Zoe just got done admiring the anaconda by the time I pressed on.

I didn't bother stopping to observe the smaller stations; there were too many people harping on the fact that the snakes weren't moving, or that they couldn't see the frogs in the tank. Eventually, I was three stations ahead of the main group. I stopped at the end of the exhibit and waited for them to catch up.

We continued down a corridor that led to a bird aviary. There were individual exhibits behind nets on the left, and birds behind glass on the right. It was partially outside so the humid Amazonian air dissipated and a cold breeze brushed through my hair. I walked past a few bright-colored birds on the left when I heard Zoe yell from behind, "Dylan, look!"

She pointed through the glass where a spectacled owl perched itself on a branch with its golden eyes wide open. They appeared to be glaring down at us.

“There’s your owl,” she mocked.

“Ha ha.”

Yet, sadly, this was probably as good as I was going to get to seeing an owl, in person. I stood there, trying to imagine seeing it without having to lean against a railing, without looking through the glass, without the concrete walls in its enclosure. To see it perched in an actual tree. To see it scan the forest floor for the slightest—

“When is it my turn?” some kid groaned behind me.

I turned around just in time to dodge an incoming stroller. I took one last glance at the owl and walked to the end of the corridor, without so much as looking at the other birds. While I waited for the others to catch up, I looked around and saw the bighorn sheep—still gazing up at the sky.

Quinn and the others caught up, and Jaylee said she wasn’t up for seeing the whole zoo. So the plan was to turn around once we finished Africa Adventure. She must’ve been bored, and I didn’t complain.

The Africa Adventure exhibit was as large as you would imagine since they needed to show all the big attractions like lions, rhinos, zebras, giraffes, gazelle, and more.

Surprisingly they didn’t have any African elephants. There were, however, African penguins. A whole bunch of them. Of course, people about fainted when they saw them.

They were enough to draw the attention of the phone addict Jaylee, who pushed and shoved to get a front-row look at them.

“Aren’t they just the cutest things?” Zoe commented beside me.

“I suppose so, yeah,” I responded somewhat flatly.

“What do you have against penguins?” she exclaimed a little too eagerly, managing to turn some heads. Everyone must’ve thought I was dropped on my head for not thinking penguins were cute.

“They’re just not my favorite,” I said softly.

“Why is that?”

I shook my head. “I have my reasons.”

Zoe seemed to shrug off the topic and went back to adoring them, along with the rest of the spectators. If only they knew half the things these penguins did, they’d probably have second thoughts.

“That one on the rock has a scar on its right eye, you see?” Zoe observed.

It wasn’t hard to spot the penguin with the scar. After a quick scan around the room, Zoe and I found a plaque that had the penguin’s picture. His name was Wilbur. There were tons of pictures that showed him with the employees.

“Oh wow, they got emperor penguins!” some woman in front of us said.

My eyes rolled to the back of my head but I held my tongue.

“No, they’re adélie penguins,” a firm, innocent-sounding voice said behind us.

Zoe and I exchanged confused looks and whirled around to see a little girl standing at the feet of a middle-aged woman. The kid must’ve been about four years old. She wore a red jacket and some kind of oceanic shirt underneath with either sharks or whales on it. For such a soft voice, I was surprised it caught the attention of Quinn and

Jaylee, who were closer to the window. The middle-aged woman gazed down at her, unsure of what to say.

“Those are adélie penguins,” the little girl reiterated.

Some of the surrounding people, including the middle-aged woman, chortled at the little girl.

“Oh my goodness, I’m so sorry.” An older man came through the crowd and hoisted the little girl onto his shoulders. “She didn’t say anything rude, did she?” he asked, embarrassed.

“Oh no, she was just telling me about these adeli penguins,” she said. She then waved a dainty goodbye as the man lifted the little girl onto his shoulder. She hollered the penguin’s name until she was out of sight.

Frozen Frontier was our last stop. Last stop and I’d be home free. We learned quickly that the main attraction in this exhibit was Cola the Polar Bear. A huge mural was dedicated to her at the top of the exhibit. Before we got to her though, there was an open pond with several mallard ducks and other birds swimming around a water fountain in the middle. A small tour group sat and watched them swim around. We were about to keep walking when a voice called from behind us. “Zoe, is that you?”

We all turned around to see a familiar face from Wheeler High. At first glance, I was caught off guard. The tour guide stepped towards us, leaving the kids by the pond. She wore a green ‘Zoo Guide’ tee over a gray sweatshirt, and her brown hair was in a bun.

“Oh my god, Emma!” Zoe exclaimed, shoving her phone into her pocket. She rushed over and threw herself into the tour guide’s arms. Meanwhile, I hadn’t moved an inch. I stood there perplexed, astonished and anxious.

Emma and Zoe caught up in about two sentences. She hugged Jaylee and Quinn too, who were just as excited to see her. Even though she wasn’t speaking directly to me, I suddenly felt like I was back in high school. Back when I saw her all the time. A brief wave of bitterness came through me, but then she looked in my direction. I tried to act like I didn’t see her and looked over at the mallards.

“Dylan? You’re back in town?” she asked, obviously recognizing me. It felt strange yet natural hearing her say my name. As if it was only yesterday rather than years.

I forced myself to meet her brown eyes. Any ounce of bitterness that was there had gone.

“Yeah, I’m back,” I said, forcing a smile.

“And you’re checking out the new zoo?” she asked, confused.

“Yeah...well, I thought I might give it a visit.” It dawned on me that I could’ve said we were there for Quinn’s birthday, but it was too late.

“I didn’t know you worked here,” Jaylee commented.

“Yeah, I’m a tour guide,” Emma replied with a smile. “My group’s right over there.” She glanced over her shoulder, making sure the kids didn’t run off somewhere. They were still standing near the pond.

“That’s awesome, how are you liking it?” Zoe asked.

“Oh, I love it,” she beamed. “I get to teach the kids a little bit about animals, so it doesn’t get much better than that. How’ve you guys been?”

Jaylee was quick to answer. “Not a whole lot. I went bowling a couple days ago with my family. You remember that arcade we all used to hang out in? The one that had skee ball? Yeah, they took those out!”

“Oh, no way,” Emma remarked.

“I know, it’s ridiculous. But they’ve got a few more games there. At least they finally got an air hockey table—my dad and I played a game.”

“We’ll have to go over and check them out then,” Emma suggested. Jaylee, Zoe, and Quinn nodded in agreement.

“Well, we’ll let you get back to it,” Quinn interjected, shuffling back.

“Alright, well it was great seeing you guys again,” Emma said.

I stepped back with the rest of the group, but I didn’t get very far before Emma called out, “Oh, Dylan.” I stopped and turned to face her again. Quinn and the others carried on. “Were you still planning on majoring in marine biology?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I replied, surprised that she remembered. “Why do you ask?”

“I don’t know if you’ve seen it yet, but we’ve got a massive Shark Tube that draws a lot of people,” she said. “I’m sure we’d love someone like you who knows what he’s talking about.”

“Oh no, no,” I croaked. “I don’t think so.” She flashed a smile, yet it looked as though she was slightly disappointed. There would’ve been a time she knew how I felt about zoos.

“That’s alright. I knew it was a long shot. But I’m just saying, we could use your knowledge.”

“Yeah. Probably.”

Emma laughed at that. She looked over her shoulder, contorting her body to check on her group of kids. They had lost interest in the ducks and were starting to wander.

“I should probably go collect them,” she said, inching backwards. She almost sounded disappointed to be leaving. Maybe a small part of me felt that way too. “If you ever change your mind, just let me know.”

“Will do,” I said, even though I didn’t mean it.

Her eyes lingered on me a second longer before she turned to rejoin her group. I turned and walked towards Quinn and the others who were waiting at the entrance to Frozen Frontier. Quinn shot me an inquisitive look. I shook my head and shrugged my shoulders—though I had a hunch that I’d see her again.

The constant noise of children’s screams echoed inside the Arctic tunnel. The sound of their heavy footfalls would’ve been enough to make a real ice cave collapse. We walked deeper into the dark abyss until it led us to a lit-up information panel about polar bears. Quinn, Jaylee, and Zoe stopped to read it. I looked over at the closest exhibit and saw people crowding around with cameras ready, waiting for something to show itself.

In the crowd, hoisted on a man’s shoulders was the same girl in the red jacket who corrected the woman on the penguins. Then, a couple of ringed seals zoomed past the window. The little girl stretched her hand on the glass. At one point, one of the seals slowed down and pressed its nose against the glass, as if smelling the girl’s hand. It was

almost as if there wasn't any glass standing between them. A squeal of excitement came from her as the seal twirled in the water.

After a bit of showboating from the seal, the father backed away from the glass. The seal's gaze seemed to lock onto the girl as they moved onto the next exhibit. Other people tried to get the seal's attention but it left them staring into the shimmering blue. The seal passed the window a couple more times, but after realizing the girl was gone, it never circled back.

"Ready to see Cola?" Quinn asked me. He, Jaylee, and Zoe had finally caught up.

"Yeah, yeah," I muttered.

We didn't have much more of the tunnel left; the last stop was the polar bear. We approached the window but there were too many heads covering the view. But from the sounds of it, Cola was definitely entertaining them. Jaylee stood on her tiptoes trying to get a view.

"Oh she's right up next to the glass," Zoe yelled out over the excited crowd.

"Damn you and your five foot eight, Zoe" Jaylee chided.

Not wanting to wait her turn, Jaylee elbowed a few people to get to the front. Zoe, Quinn, and I followed. Finally we were able to get a clear look at the enclosure, which was much more spacious compared to others we'd seen: a rocky cave stood in the background, along with a large pool of water. It didn't take long for Cola to come around the bend, her white fur coat contrasting against the dark gray walls. She was walking towards us, but her head swayed side to side with each step as if bobbing to music. She kept moving forward then paused, just before her head collided with the glass. Then, she walked backwards, her head still bobbing.

Everyone was intrigued by Cola—clapping and laughing at her bizarre dance. It might've been cute the first few times, but there was something depressing in the repetition. Each time Cola got close to the glass, her eyes looked inanimate, as if fixated on one thing. I could see fluffs of fur blowing off her back. And all the rubber toys and balls floated on top of the water with no sign of any bite marks.

Quinn nudged my shoulder. “What do you think that’s all about?” he asked, regarding her dance routine.

“I have no idea,” I admitted.

For once, I was glad I wasn't the only one who noticed. Quinn raised the same question with Zoe and Jaylee. Meanwhile, I overheard one of the tour guides talking with a visitor.

“Oh yeah, she loves dancing,” he smiled, boastfully. “This is very common for her. She'll wake up and start the day with a little dance routine, and the people get a real kick out of it.”

At the same time, people kept nudging me in the back. It seemed as though they were trying to push me into the glass and closer to Cola.

“I don't know what she's doing,” Zoe said, pulling me back into the moment, “but I don't like it. It reminds me too much of a circus. Let's go.”

Thankfully, Zoe was a little more forceful with the crowd that she managed to clear a path for us. Quinn and Jaylee were right behind her, but I took one more look at Cola. Maybe I was hoping she'd break her routine, and play it off as some sick trick, but she didn't. I waited a little longer to see if she'd stop and play with one of those ruddy toys in the water. But she didn't.

“Dylan, come on!” I heard Quinn’s voice holler in the background. Who was I to recommend staying longer?

Sticking close to the walls, I squeezed through the crowd and stepped out into the drizzle. Once more, I passed by the bighorn sheep. He maintained the same posture as when we first passed him; I briefly wondered if he really was a statue. But I could see that Quinn, Zoe, and Jaylee had already passed the giant map. Without looking back, I picked up the pace. The last thing I saw before walking through the gates was a small spider sitting in its web.

Chapter 3: The Hunch

Jaylee dropped me off close to 4pm. Dad wasn't home yet, so I went upstairs to finish unpacking my bags. Now that there was actual daylight filling my room, I could see how disastrous it looked: piles of books had spilled out of my unzipped backpack, and a mess of clothes laid over my unmade bed.

After I finished tidying things up, I headed downstairs and plopped onto the couch. It was the first time in the past twelve hours that I could sit still and breathe. I gazed around the room. Dad's old lounging chair was still in the corner of the room; whatever book he was currently reading was set on the corner of the coffee table; and scenic pictures of Nirmala (before the great expansion) lined the shelves above the TV.

At least something felt like home.

Eventually I heard Dad's car pull into the driveway. I counted the seconds until he hurried through the door and closed it behind him. He had his uniform jacket raised above his head. He shook off the raindrops and hung it on the coat rack. Then he let out a heavy sigh and stared at me blankly.

"Long day?" I said.

"It's nasty out there," he answered. He knelt down and untied his shoes, and set them on the shoe rack by the door.

I got up and followed him into the kitchen, expecting him to talk more about his day, but he didn't. I guess there wasn't much else to say. No matter how many times he brought it up, I never fully understood what Dad did other than the fact that he was the Sheriff in town. Literally.

Back when Nirmala was small and tight-knit, he helped nearly everyone in town. Everyone knew who he was. You could've asked anyone what they'd thought of him and you'd get the same answer: a noble, respected, hard-working man.

"I was thinking we could make spaghetti tonight?" Dad suggested.

"What else is new?" I scoffed.

"This time, I'll sprinkle cheese on top of it. No sauce."

"Damn, you're changing the formula."

Dad let out a weak laugh, and proceeded to reach into cabinets to get spices out. Unlike any sane person, the couch and TV were never the first things he turned to after work. It's like he's in constant work mode. It's crazy. I almost didn't want to put more burden on him.

"What else is going on in the new Nirmala?" I asked him as he started boiling water in a pot.

"Nothing really. Couple crazy Californian drivers, but other than that, just your average day in the office."

"Sounds wonderful," I remarked.

I stayed quiet in case he wanted to add anything else to his long day, but it seemed to be all he could muster.

"Hey, I was wondering if you could investigate something for me?" I asked him.

He stopped and eyed me suspiciously.

"If you're not busy that is," I quickly added.

"Investigate something? What kind of mission are you sending me on?"

"Well, my friends and I checked out that new zoo...."

“Oh, how is that?” Dad asked, his eyes glowing. “I’ve only heard good things about it.”

I shook my head. “Not good. Something seemed off about it. None of the animals looked all that lively, and their pens are ridiculously small. There was this polar bear that was just pacing back and forth. It was like he was broken or something.” Dad listened as I told him the rest of what we saw. I was hesitant to ask him the next part. “So, I was hoping that maybe you could go down there and inspect the place—if you’re able to do that sort of thing.”

“That sounds like something zookeepers take care of, not a police officer,” Dad said.

“That’s the thing, I don’t trust them. Not even in the slightest.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I heard some of the tour guides. They don’t know anything about animals. I’m sure they don’t even care about them either. I’ve got a gut feeling.”

Dad gave me a look as if he were going to give me a sit-down lecture.

“A gut feeling,” he repeated.

“Yes.”

Dad let out a small “Hmm” before pulling out a chair and sitting down. I took a seat across from him, waiting for his response.

“You do realize that you’re making dangerous accusations based on speculation, right?” Dad mentioned.

“Isn’t it better to be safe than sorry?” I asked.

He thought for a second then said, “Okay, I’ll tell you what. I’ll get some officers, and we’ll check it out first thing tomorrow morning,” he said rather reluctantly, but I was grateful that he was doing it for me.

“Okay,” I said, trying to contain my relief. “But don’t let them know who called it in please.”

“We won’t,” Dad agreed.

Talking to Dad lifted a huge burden off my shoulders, even if it was for the time being. Ever since I came home, we haven’t had a lot of time to catch up and relax. He’s been so busy dealing with the town’s changes, but it was really nice having our first real dinner together.

“Oh, I forgot to tell you,” Dad said, with a mouthful of spaghetti. “This Wednesday, we’ve got to go over to Aunt Wendy’s.”

“What? No. Don’t tell me—”

“The Alderbridge Christmas get-together,” he nodded shamefully.

If there was one thing I dreaded more than Christmas, it was our family Christmas party. I’ve always tried to avoid my family, but sometimes I had no choice.

“It’ll be fine,” Dad said, in response to my heavy groan. “We won’t stay there longer than we need to.”

“Alright, I’ll remember to bring my hazmat suit then.”

Dad rolled his eyes sarcastically.

I was awake the next morning to see Dad head out the door. He had already called his partner and others to go over and investigate the zoo. All I had to do was wait. Normally,

I'd kill time by watching animal documentaries or working on a coloring book, but I couldn't get myself to sit still.

I asked what Quinn was up to, and luckily he was free. We decided to meet at Minihana's, one of the best restaurants in Nirmala. The restaurant sat right next to the boat docks by the bay, which meant you had a great view of the bay since the windows were massive and ran along the whole restaurant. Dad took me there when I was young, and we'd count all the seals poking their heads above the surface while we waited for our food. If you sat on the opposite side of the restaurant, you got a perfect view of the boats coming into the docks and breathtaking sunsets.

Quinn and I used to eat there a lot after school. I figured it'd distract me at least for the moment. But when we got there, we got some unfortunate news.

"Oh, great," I muttered to myself.

Taped to the glass door, underneath their hours, was a paper sign with a short message written in sharpie. It read: *After twenty years of service, we will be shutting down and relocating to the Nirmala Zoo next summer.*

Didn't matter where I went. I couldn't escape the news of the Nirmala Zoo, even if I wanted to. So really, this would be my last time eating at the original Minihana's.

The inside was pretty barren. It was quiet enough that you could hear the lyrics of the songs in the background. There were only three different parties scattered throughout the restaurant when Quinn and I arrived, with one or two waitresses.

We seated ourselves near the window that faced the bay, a booth that we had claimed since our freshmen year. It's where we sat and complained about terrible teachers at Wheeler, and it's where we sat the day before I left for Hawaii.

When the waitress came to take our orders, she didn't appear too happy. Maybe she too hated the idea of relocating to the zoo. Nevertheless, she forced a friendly smile. Quinn and I got our usual, and she headed to the back.

"How was the rest of your birthday?" I asked him.

"It was pretty good. Being nineteen doesn't feel all that different," he responded.

"It's all the same. What did you end up doing later?"

"Nothing special. Me and my folks had a small barbecue and we had a fire down by the beach."

"Oh nice. That's perfect for you."

Quinn nodded, then said, "Sorry that we ended up going to the zoo yesterday."

A mutual understanding passed between us, as we very well knew that it was Jaylee's idea.

I waved my hand. "Don't worry about it. I was there for you."

"I know, but how was it for you?"

I shook my head and I told him about how most of the animals looked miserable and how nobody seemed to care about them. I could've gone on and on but Quinn knew what I was talking about. None of it was new to him. He's pretty much grown accustomed to it.

"I'm sure there are some people who care," Quinn said. "Like myself, and Jaylee, and Zoe—"

"I know you guys do," I broke him off. "And I'm sure there are people who care, but I get so frustrated about the people who don't."

"Maybe we should've found something else to do," Quinn admitted.

“No, if anything, it’s a good thing we went.”

I gazed out the window for a bit, counting only half a dozen boats on the bay before our food arrived, surprisingly quick too. And it wasn’t all that great either. Sometimes you don’t notice how terrible the food is until after the meal, but this time you could’ve known from the first bite. Quinn didn’t seem to mind whatever he was eating.

“Here’s a thought,” Quinn said suddenly, “if you don’t like the people who work at the zoo, why don’t you work there yourself?”

“Not a chance,” I exclaimed. “Why would that make any sense?”

“Because,” Quinn started, “then Nirmala would have someone who knows what they’re doing.”

“Jesus,” I sighed. “That’s exactly what Emma said.”

“Right—what was that all about? When she pulled you aside?”

“She wanted me to work at the zoo.”

“She’s got a point though,” Quinn said gingerly.

“I don’t care, I’m not going to work there and be part of the problem.”

Quinn raised his hands as if surrendering, and took another bite of his lunch. Not much longer, he asked, “Do you know if she’s still with Elijah?”

“I don’t know,” I said flatly. I took a swig of water and gazed out the window, counting the boats again.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said again. “Dad’s on the case now and he’ll take care of it.”

For once, Dad was already home by the time I got back. I didn't expect it but it was a welcome surprise. He was on the couch, typing on his laptop. He looked up once he heard me walk through the door.

“So, what did you find?” I asked him, hoping for some good news. I realized that I hadn't even been in the house for five seconds and I immediately jumped to the main question, but I spent the whole day waiting for an answer, I couldn't bear to wait any longer.

The look on Dad's face, though, revealed the upsetting news before the words left his mouth. “There was nothing there.”

It felt as if a heavy club rammed into my stomach. I let out a heavy sigh and threw my neck back.

“I know that's not what you want to hear, but the place is clean—”

“Do you not believe me?” I lashed out. It caught Dad by surprise, and it would've thrown me off if I weren't bottled up with so much frustration.

“I never said I didn't believe you.”

“You know I'd never say anything if I didn't feel like there was something going on.”

“I know, but we inspected the whole place—”

“Well, can't you search again?”

Dad looked at me with hopeless eyes. For a while, he looked down at his laptop, then closed it. He looked exhausted, but I was too bothered to leave him be.

“What're we going to do about the zoo now?” I asked desperately.

“There isn’t anything we can do,” Dad stated. “I think you should just give the zoo a chance. Give it a chance to prove you wrong. Maybe it’s not as bad as you think it is.”

I grimaced. “You want me to just forget everything I saw? What kind of advice is that?” I snapped.

“The best advice that I can give you, Dylan,” Dad said firmly. I looked directly into his eyes. “I’m sorry. We did our best. Now we just have to live with it.”

“What if something else comes up?”

He gave me a pitiful shrug. It was no use trying to ask any more questions. The discussion was over.

For a moment I just stood in the doorway, not sure what to think. Then I headed upstairs for the rest of the night. Over the years, I’d witnessed Dad make a lot of tough calls in regards to his job. There’ve been days when he’d come home conflicted about a case; he wouldn’t concentrate on any simple task, he second guessed himself—but in the end, he always did what he thought was best for the town. Even when his back was pinned against the wall, he strove to make the right decision. I usually trusted Dad’s judgement; I didn’t agree with his decision this time.

That night, with so many things on my mind, I needed to clear my head. The air was brisk, but it was a welcome break from the humidity of Hawaii. I ended up walking down the highway, past all the shops, and down to the boat docks.

Ever since I wandered down to the docks at the start of high school, I never stopped coming back. There’s something special about being the only one sitting out

there, with all the boats motionless, the water so calm it might as well be solid ground, and the full moon illuminating reflections on the water. I'm always down there at 9pm, the last hour before it closes to the public at 10pm. And in summertime, you could see Orion's Belt, the Big Dipper and Little Dipper—some nights, I saw shooting stars.

But just like everything else in town, even the docks felt different. The night didn't feel asleep; it felt very much awake. I could hear and see the traffic driving along the highway on the other side of the bay—the car headlights pinhead-sized torches skimming the surface of the black water.

I looked down at the water. Ripples obscured my reflection. On the other side of the docks, there were two large fishing vessels that appeared to still be operational. I couldn't get a good look because the lights were too bright to look at, but it sounded like the crew members were still on board. People were shouting directions at each other and, by the sound of it, tossing or dragging heavy crates across the floor.

Normally, I'd stick around until the dock lights flickered to life: that's when I knew it was time to go. However, I barely stayed twenty minutes. I couldn't handle the noise of screaming people, the banging and clanging of metal crates, the blinding lights, any of it. Once again, the *new-and-improved* Nirmala was changing everything I once loved about this place. The more places I revisited, the more it seemed that Nirmala wasn't my home anymore. It honestly felt like Nirmala was intentionally trying to banish me or something.

Thing is, I would leave, but I was just like all those boats tied up to the dock.

Reflective Essay:

Creative & Real Life Influences:

The first thing I had in mind when I started writing this novel was J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*—one of my all-time favorite novels. Holden Caulfield is one of my favorite protagonists because he's got complex attitudes. I wanted to use his informal stream of consciousness storytelling; however, I realized that the style didn't quite fit with Dylan's character. He carries an informal tone throughout, so I kept some similarities, but overall, I feel like I deviated from my initial inspiration. It was a necessary sacrifice in order to serve my story's purpose.

Some other works influenced parts of the plot. My thesis advisor, Dr. Lars Söderlund, read the Komodo dragon shooting in chapter 11 as a horror or thriller sequence. At the time of writing that chapter in particular, I was going through what I call a *horror phase*. In the month of October 2020, I became fascinated by the horror genre. The scene establishes a feeling of dread; we aren't sure what's going on, but there's a slow reveal to what's causing people in the zoo to panic. There's also the television show *Grimm* (2011-2017), along with other crime dramas that inspired the interrogation scene in chapter 18. They also helped me develop John's character as the Sheriff.

There were also many influences derived from my personal life that seeped into the narrative—one of those being a passion for animals. I grew up watching a lot of Animal Planet programs like *Most Extreme*, *Crocodile Hunter*, and the BBC documentaries like *Planet Earth*, *Blue Planet*, *Life*, etc. One of my favorite programs (*Shark Week*) was actually referenced in chapter 12 when Dylan and Emma are bonding in the Shark Tube. Additionally, when John is reminiscing about the things Dylan said as

a kid—such as saying a woman’s hair is as long as a sperm whale, or correcting someone on an animal’s name—those are actual statements I’ve said to people as a kid. Some of the references to my childhood may not fit the best in its context (that’s something I will mend later) but I thought they’d be fun easter eggs for my family.

Another key influence is the small town of Garibaldi, Oregon, about 10 miles north of Tillamook. My family has owned a house there for 16 years, so it’s a very special place to me. Rather than using Garibaldi as the setting for the story, I decided to use a fictional town by the name of Nirmala; it is my reimagining of what Garibaldi would look like if it had a big zoo. My justification for using a fictional town is so I could have more creative freedom. I felt that if I stuck with Garibaldi, I’d be limited to what I could add. I realized I could pull inspiration from a real town to develop a setting that fits with the story. For example, I wanted to emphasize the town’s expansion, and show how Dylan feels unwelcome in his old home. But, to this day, Garibaldi remains a small town. I also wanted to replicate the same structure of the boat docks. One of the biggest problems with that instance is that Garibaldi has an interesting layout, and I had trouble accurately depicting it, while trying to stay true to its real layout and making sure readers weren’t too confused.

Writing Process:

The origins for this story date back to March 2016, when my family and I took a trip to the Wildlife Safari in Winston, Oregon. I’d been to the Portland Zoo many times in my life, but there was something special about seeing the animals up close—it felt more intimate and personal. It got me thinking about what life looked like in the eyes of one of

the animals in captivity. Eventually, it got me thinking about the ethics behind keeping animals in zoos.

Sure enough, I wrote a premature version of *Slaughterhouse Zoo* for my senior project in high school, but it barely touched the surface of what I wanted it to be. I decided junior year at WOU that I wanted to expand the *Slaughterhouse Zoo* novella. I wanted to highlight the importance of zoos, but also show that they can be equally harmful when operated under poor management.

I started the first chapter of the novel in October of 2019. By June 2020, 7 months later and averaging 2 chapters a month, I had a complete first draft of the novel. During that time, my primary challenge was getting over the mentality that I had to have everything figured out the first time around. I had to force myself to write something, no matter how messy it was, and immediately move onto the next chapter so I could maintain my momentum. I have a lot of fond memories drafting the beginnings of the story, since I could focus on being innovative and creative rather than editing each section to perfection.

I was 10 chapters into the first draft by the time the pandemic started. However, the quarantine escalated my productivity. Multiple days a week, I would stay up late, working on chapters for up to 2 hours. From March to May, I completed a total of 6 chapters. So in many ways, that was the fun stage—being able to write freely and not worrying about bad lines. But those problems would eventually arise by the time I reached the second draft.

When it came time to eventually face those bad lines again, it took me a long time to refine them the way I wanted. I was stuck on some chapters for over a month which

severely stopped my momentum. Because I couldn't conjure up solutions or fresh ideas, I became discouraged from working or thinking about the story. Eventually, in the interest of time, I had to leave some chapters "ill-revised" because I couldn't let one chapter halt my progress. I had a good thing going—revising chapters in chronological order—then my decision to get feedback from the Writing Center complicated things.

I realized late in the game (Winter Term of my senior year) that I should've been utilizing the Writing Center. By the time I scheduled my first appointment, I was currently revising chapter 14 in my own chronology. We started at the beginning and read through all the chapters in order. So the second draft process saw me working on 3 different sections at the same time. For example, I was working on chapter 14 in my own chronology; revisiting chapter 6 with the Writing Center; and I was making changes to those chapters. Needless to say, my last two terms at WOU were an overwhelming time: balancing schoolwork, the stress of unemployment, my story, and personal matters. I knew very well that it wasn't the most effective method, but I was hoping to complete a second draft before Spring Term.

Though I struggled a lot with the drafting process, it was an important learning experience for me. I noticed that I have a tendency to over-complicate my writing process by dividing my attention to multiple sections at once.

Writing Center Appointments:

One of the hardest things about this novel was identifying who the audience was and what the genre was. I originally intended for it to be a Young Adult story, but the more I let the story go where it wanted to go, the further it seemed to deviate from the

genre. My bi-weekly thesis appointments with Dr. Söderlund and frequent Writing Center appointments helped me navigate through these challenges.

In my appointments with Dr. Söderlund, we mainly discussed big-picture ideas with the story. We got to talk about it broadly. After each draft of a chapter, we'd talk about whether or not the characters were consistent. Like if Dylan's voice remained consistent, as well as taking a look at his relationships with the characters. One of the biggest areas of discussion revolved around Dylan and Emma's relationship. I wanted to show a platonic friendship, with nothing romantic between them. But the way some of their interactions were described indicated otherwise. So we talked about how to mend that, how to show their special connection without misleading readers into expecting a romantic plot. I wanted to subvert the expectation that when a boy and girl have a personal friendship, it usually leads to a romantic relationship. Ultimately what cleared the air was omitting any lines that relied on heartbreak cliches and using more organic, specific language to describe their unique relationship.

Apart from my thesis appointments, I also booked over 50 appointments at the Writing Center. These meetings were extremely beneficial as it allowed me to hear critical feedback on the text alone, from outside readers. Some of the story's biggest changes arose from these appointments with Nova Kohnke. In our first appointment, we came up with a significant change that would better establish the setting and characters in the first chapter. In the first draft, the opening scene saw Dylan looking over the town and seeing all the changes. But I feared that the excessive exposition wasn't engaging enough, and readers would lose interest before the conflict arose. One simple solution to this was adding Quinn on the mountain with him; this allowed me to explore Dylan and Quinn's

friendship while also providing context for the setting through their dialogue. The first draft of chapter 2 was an absolute mess of ideas, but after de-summarizing certain passages, it allowed me to narrow the focus on the animals and clearly establish the conflict.

Because I pulled a lot of inspiration from a variety of media (from documentaries, books, and movies), I had a lot of trouble finding my story's own genre and audience. Audience became clear when I was talking to Rosario Peralta Cortez from the Writing Center. When I explained the story to her, she talked about her nephew who is fascinated by animals—how he'd give people stickers for answering an animal-related question correctly, and how he wants to be a marine biologist. That's when I knew that's who my audience was. I wanted this story to call out to those who are interested in animals, anyone who's been fascinated by them one way or another.

Future Plans:

The first half of the novel feels strong to me. Characters seem clearly established, the conflict is clear, and the motivations are there. But once we hit chapter 11, the plot thickens and there's one massive event after another with little to no transitions. I acknowledge that the second half of the story has a lot of plot holes and inconsistencies. The reveal of the animal fighting arena consists of 2 chapters—and even then, the chapters feel short and rushed.

Throughout the process of revising *Slaughterhouse Zoo*, I've compiled a long list of ideas and changes that will enhance the story. However, as I've mentioned prior, I didn't have enough time to make all the changes I wanted; some of Dr. Söderlund and the

Writing Center's suggestions didn't even make it into the thesis. That's not to say that these changes were scrapped entirely. My future plans for this project is to reevaluate certain aspects of the story, and incorporate the bigger changes. So, my first order of business post-thesis is to refine those rough edges, as well as flesh out the ideas and themes better.

One of my biggest challenges was spotlighting all the essential characters. I feel like I missed a golden opportunity to see the four essential characters—Dylan, Emma, Quinn, and Angela—band together and try to figure out what's happening at the zoo. Of course, if I were to follow through with this idea, I would have to sacrifice Dylan and Emma's fallout that occurs in chapter 13. After some thought, I've come to terms with letting go of this idea. Dylan and Emma can still find Wilbur's body washed ashore, and she can still be reluctant to help take down Victor; that way, she can still receive her redemption story.

I also want to diversify the characters. I have one LGBTQ character with Angela, but since she was added into the story in the second draft, she isn't well-defined, and barely makes appearances. Apart from Angela, the rest of the characters lack ethnic diversity. This is something I want to explore more once I have time to weave more intricate backstory into the characters.

There are numerous plot details that I want to expand or elaborate on: the Alderbridge Christmas Party is one of them. This happens a bit too early in the novel (chapter 4) and I believe there's a way to combine the events of the Nirmala Parade (chapter 9) and the Family Party. The purpose of these chapters was to dive into Dylan's tragic Christmas past—how his mother's abandonment feeds into his hatred of Christmas.

The problem with chapter 4 and 9 is that there is way too much going on. It felt like I was cramming character development, backstory, explanations, and it's very easy for one of those to become lost in the mix. After discussing the chapters with Nova, we found a solution. Rather than throwing in the Nirmala Parade, I could move the Family Christmas Party in its place. That way, the chapter can solely focus on Dylan's tragic Christmas story, and Angela's development will resonate better. I can save the Bondfire for another chapter.

Another grievance I have with the story has to do with the fact that the entire story takes place during one month when Dylan returns to Nirmala for winter break. The story starts to feel rushed and outlandish after chapter 10. After Christmas Day, a Komodo dragon is shot in the school, Dylan realizes Emma has been hiding the dark truth about Victor, Dylan's dad says he will have to arrest him if he gets caught, Dylan sneaks into the zoo, and Dylan finds the animal fighting arena down by the docks.... That's quite an eventful break! There's a simple way to mend this issue: extending the timeline.

Sometime in between these crazy events, Dylan can decide he wants to stay in Nirmala to fix the problem, even if it jeopardizes his academic life. Not only would this provide more time for events to happen, it would also build more layers to Dylan's character.

Lastly, I wanted to add one more chapter to the end of the story. I realized, too close to the end of my senior year, that Emma's redemption arc lacked resolve. She turns her father in to the authorities, but that's it for her: she doesn't make a comeback. She and Dylan don't reunite by the end of the novel. Initially, I wanted to keep the ending open-ended (because I really like ambiguous endings); as a result, though, it leaves the story with an awkward ending that doesn't fully capture what I want audiences to feel.

Again, a lot of these changes will require much more time and thoroughness, so those will be changes I will make for the next draft of the story.

Though I've been vocal about how I feel about the second half of the story and all the changes I want to make, I am proud of the content I created for this project. I found that it's easy to undermine the work I've done, especially when it doesn't feel fully complete. But I believe in my story and the characters that have come to life. This project has tested my patience, my work ethic, and my confidence—but I know it's made me a more well-rounded writer. Not only did I get to utilize the writing skills I've acquired in my college career, but I also got to work with other talented writers. They provided me with honest, insightful feedback that has strengthened my work. The next step is to refine the story some more and publish it traditionally.