

Peacock In the Gift Shop

By Grace Reinhold

It was eight o'clock on a warm, Saturday morning in the middle of June and Ross was struggling to stay awake towards the rear of the noisy, city bus, headed for the zoo. In the seat behind him a smelly, skinny, toothless man, appearing to be in his late twenties, was rocking back and forth, muttering obsessively to himself, while the elderly woman across the aisle loudly lamented to the bus driver about her grown children's lack of contact. A teenage girl with blood-shot eyes chewed her nails and stared out the window as she sang along with her iPod. Candy wrappers, cigarette butts and dried, discolored chewing gum littered the floor and seats.

Eager to escape the noise and grime, Ross leapt from his seat when the bus squeaked to a halt two stops before the zoo. *Forget this crowd*, he thought. He would happily walk the rest of the way.

He was lightly sweating in his Black Sabbath t-shirt and jeans, when he finally reached the zoo. The zoo was surrounded by thick, white, concrete walls, decorated with what appeared to be cave drawings of different animals in primary colors. "The zoo doesn't open to the public for another hour," the bored gate attendant croaked.

"My name's Ross Landen. I'm supposed to be here for community service."

“That’s right! Bruce said something about that yesterday. Identification, please.” Ross handed the attendant his eighth grade school ID. “Alright, Ross, here’s a map of the place. Head on in to the left, until you get to the blue building. You’re gonna want to go to the second floor to Bruce Roger’s office.” She opened the gate and waved him through.

Ross was about to knock on Bruce Roger’s door when it opened to reveal a short dark-haired man with a round face, sporting a blue Oak County Zoo! baseball cap, with a pony tail hanging out the back and a white T-shirt, who stopped and said, “Ah, you must be Ross. I was just heading down to the gate to see if you were having any trouble getting in. I spoke to Tabatha yesterday about you, but she can be pretty forgetful sometimes. Especially before noon,” he chuckled. “Come on in and have a seat.”

Ross crossed the small white room that was free of any decoration aside from a half-alive plant by the window, and a poster of a tiger on the wall, to sit in one of the blue plastic seats in front of a sturdy walnut desk, while Bruce took a comfy seat behind it.

“Ross, I understand you were arrested a short while back for vandalism of school property. Something involving spray paint and some foul words? So while you are here we are going to have you perform various janitorial chores. Every morning that you arrive, you are to report here to my office, where you will sign in on this sheet,” Bruce lifted a clipboard from his desk, and handed it to him, “and where I will give you your assignment of the day. You are welcome to store any of your belongings in my office and if you bring a lunch, you are welcome to keep it in my mini-refrigerator. Now then, today I’m going to have you start by cleaning the

staff bathrooms on both floors of this building and cleaning the break room. Since it's your first day I fetched the supplies you will need from the janitor's closet, which I will show to you on our way to the bathroom. After today you will be expected to fetch the supplies on your own."

Bruce gave Ross a tour of the building. He showed him the creepy basement, the janitor closet and the staff break room, where he was introduced to various employees who were gearing up for the day with muffins and hot coffee. Finally Bruce led Ross to the bathroom, where he handed him a blue baseball cap with Oak County Zoo! printed on the front, "So you can look more like part of the team," and left him to his duties.

Ross refilled all the toilet paper and paper towel dispensers. He cleaned the mirrors and scrubbed the walls, floors and toilets with bleach water until his fingers were beyond the prune stage and all feeling.

After a short lunch break in Bruce's office, consisting of a soggy peanut butter jelly sandwich, he headed to the empty break room to continue his duties. He cleared everything from the counters, dusting and sterilizing every cranny. He cleaned out the refrigerator, pitching a few fuzzy, blue items and scraping off some sticky patches of mysterious pink goo.

He worked from open to close, after which he returned to the apartment he and his mother shared. His mother wasn't home, like always. She was at work at the factory no doubt. Paying the bills had always been a struggle and now she had to pick up an extra shift to pay off

Ross's court fines. He finished off half a bag of stale potato chips for dinner and fell asleep on the sofa, watching fuzzy old episodes of Seinfeld and Cheers.

Over the next couple weekends at the zoo, Ross dutifully cleaned around the office building for Bruce and eventually got moved to outside chores. Ross cleaned the outside of the windows; he swept the porch, weeded the garden, and mowed the lawn. At the end of each day Bruce inspected the quality of Ross's work; if it was less than satisfactory, he ordered Ross to redo the projects on his next visit.

One day when Ross arrived at Bruce's office, he was surprised to find that he would finally be free of laboring over the blue building! "We need your attention to detail, elsewhere, son," Bruce explained. Ross couldn't wait to escape the blue bubble!

Ross gathered his supplies from the janitor's closet and placed them on a cart as instructed by Bruce, who led him down the elevator and outside. They started off down the sidewalk. Animal displays came into sight. They passed the zebra, rhinoceros, and ostrich exhibits. Ross knew none of the animals were yet out for the day, but he excitedly squinted his eyes anyway, eager for a glimpse. They rounded the primate house and the aquariums, passed a lemon ice stand and stopped when they finally reached ...*a bathroom?* Ross' hopes sank.

"Our actual janitors usually clean the customer bathrooms, but I think you're damn near a professional now, yourself and can handle it. I've been most impressed by your efforts, son,"

Bruce beamed, “Just place your cart in front of the door like so, and people will know the bathroom is closed for cleaning. Sometimes they don’t listen or care, so don’t be too surprised if somebody busts in anyway, “ Bruce laughed, “The crowds usually come around noon, one o’clock, so try to have things finished by then. When the bathrooms are complete, report back to my office. See ya later!” Bruce slapped Ross on the back and disappeared.

Ross spent the next several minutes standing outside the bathroom door, clenching his fists and gritting his teeth. *Another bathroom!* He thought he was done with bathrooms. He thought his efforts had been appreciated, prized. He thought he was going to get to maybe clean around the animal pens or something. He wanted to see the animals! He wanted to get out of this dump!

A woman Ross recognized as an employee from Bruce’s office walked by with a concerned look on her face. Ross smiled half-heartedly and grabbed his spray bottle of sanitizer and shuffled into the bathroom.

Over his next several visits, Bruce continued to have Ross clean every bathroom on the property. He cleaned the customer bathrooms; he cleaned the private staff bathrooms in the food court. He cleaned the bathrooms in the laboratory buildings, with their mirror windows, hiding their animal patients.

One morning Bruce led Ross to the gift shop, to clean the private staff bathroom and help the shop keeper, Nancy, with any other projects she desired assistance with. Ross began by

angrily cleaning the bathroom mirror and wiping down the toilet. He was about to fill the toilet paper dispenser when he threw the toilet paper roll against the wall. Next he chucked the garbage, threw his zoo cap into the sink and spat on the mirror.

“I’ve had enough of this shit!” he cried. He crawled out the window and marched off into the zoo.

He stomped down the sidewalk and across the perfect lawns until he collapsed against the back wall of the penguin house. He sat there for several minutes glaring at the “stupid flowers” and uprooting the grass with his fingers. He took a deep breath and blinked back his hot, angry tears. He was just about to give in to his despair when someone cleared their throat beside him.

“You plan on picking some of those flowers to decorate my bathroom with?” A red-headed, soft spoken woman, with freckly arms inquired. It was Nancy, the woman who ran the gift shop.

Ross jumped, coughed and started gathering the flowers he had cursed moments before, “Uh, yeah.”

Nancy sat down in the grass beside Ross and asked “What’s on your mind, kid?” and stared in his direction until he finally looked her in the eyes.

“I’m not cleaning any more fucking bathrooms!” he growled.

“Whoa, sounds like you need to clean up your mouth first. Is cleaning bathrooms really the problem here?”

“I had a choice you know. I almost wish I’d chosen juvenile hall instead of this. Every day it’s the same. I know every day would pretty much be the same in juvenile hall too, but at least in juvey I wouldn’t have to be cleaning bathrooms day in and day out. At least nobody would *pretend* to appreciate me there. The only reason I picked community service here is because I thought it would actually be kind of fun. I’ve never been to a zoo before.”

“You’re joking!” Nancy exclaimed.

“No,” he replied sadly, “my mom and I have never had very much money. We don’t even have much time to spend together because she’s always working just so we can eat. My dad walked out on my mom before I was born, so there’s never been any extra money for trips to the zoo or Dairy Queen, nothing like that. When I was a kid, my class went on a field trip to the zoo once. I couldn’t afford the fee, so I had to stay behind in the principal’s office and do puzzles instead. I suppose you’re gonna tell Bruce I bailed, huh?” Ross laid his head on his knees.

Nancy offered him a lemon drop from the secret stash she kept in her pink Oak County Zoo! fanny pack, “Nah. Scrubbing bathrooms all summer is enough to drive anybody over the edge. I can’t blame you for needing a little break. But I still expect you to clean my bathroom, especially since it wasn’t so bad until you trashed the place.”

Ross bit his lip, “Sorry,” he whispered.

“Don’t worry. We’ve still got twenty minutes until the zoo opens so we can work on it together. When it’s finished, maybe I can give you a more exciting project to do. Let’s head back shall we? The stench of this penguin house is interfering with my enjoyment of this lemon drop and we’d better get back in case Bruce comes poking around.”

Having finished polishing the gift shop bathroom together with extra care, Nancy put Ross to work in the shop. She had him shake out the welcome mat, vacuum the floor and clean the windows. Ross was grateful to be free from bathroom duty but disappointed to still be stuck cleaning. He was dusting the inside of the window ledge, dreaming of lazing on the beach like a normal 14 year old on summer vacation when he was brought back to reality by a peculiar sight. A peacock was marching straight at him!

Ross dropped his rag and yelled, “Nancy!” with a smile.

“Well I’ll be,” Nancy laughed. “He must’ve snuck in the door while I was taking the trash out back. Ross, would you mind escorting our new little friend here back outside?”

The peacock puffed out its aristocratic, indigo breast which was freckled with gold, while a violet sprig crowned its regal head. Ross was thrilled to interact with the animal, but sad to see it go. After he shoed it out of the door, he watched it proudly strut off into the distance, flaunting its majesty.

Bruce returned shortly after, to find Ross dusting the gift shop, with a spring in his step and a twinkle in his eye Bruce had never witnessed before. When Nancy requested that Ross stay in the shop for the rest of the day to assist her, Bruce couldn't see why not and readily agreed

Every weekend Nancy continued to request Ross's assistance until the gift shop became his permanent station for the summer. Ross slowly worked his way up from cleaning boy, to shelf stocker, to cashier. On his lunch breaks he helped himself to the pamphlets and books about all the animals in the zoo; until he was able to recite the animal facts to the curious children he helped in the shop.

Ross continued to volunteer in the gift shop once his court ordered community service was completed. Instead of reading about the animals, he was able to wander the exhibits on his lunch breaks instead.

Before he knew it, it was Ross's last day at the zoo. The zoo wouldn't close for a couple more months, but school began the next day and Ross's mother didn't want Ross to have any distractions during the year. Nancy brought in cupcakes for the occasion and Bruce presented Ross with a green Oak County Zoo! fanny pack, which Ross accepted graciously, knowing he would never be caught dead wearing it.

Bruce walked Ross out to the parking lot where Nancy was waiting; she'd offered to give Ross a ride home on his last day, aware of his immense hatred of the bus. "I'm real proud of you, Ross. I wasn't sure you'd survive the summer, but you went above and beyond. You've been a

great addition to our team, and I like to think we've been good for you. If you're interested, I'd love for you to come work for us next summer. Just come on by and you're in." Bruce shook Ross' hand and slapped him on the back. "Take it easy, son."

Ross thanked him and climbed into Nancy's green station wagon. They drove in understanding silence. When they reached Ross' apartment Nancy gave Ross a motherly embrace and said "I let it in you know." Ross looked at her questionably. "The peacock, that first day in the gift shop. You needed a pick me up and it seemed to do the trick. Don't ever give up on yourself like that again, Ross. You really rescued me this summer. Always shut up in that lonely gift shop. I really hope you come back next summer."

"I rescued you? You rescued me! If it wasn't for you I would've been stuck cleaning bathrooms all summer and probably start to smell like one. Thanks for everything Nancy."

They embraced again and Ross climbed out onto the sidewalk. Before she drove away, Nancy tossed a lemon drop out the window. Ross caught it and waited until she was out of sight before heading up the stairs to the apartment. He started to un-wrap the lemon drop, but when he got inside he placed it on his mother's pillow instead.