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A Letter About Philadelphia

by Gracie Morrison

My dear friend.

I went to a zoo recently. My favorite animal was an ape named Sam, with red eyes. Sam is such a human name. I can't enjoy zoos the way I did as a kid. I couldn't stop thinking about how little some of the cages are.

I went to Philadelphia last week. Saw Ben Franklin's grave. Big whoop. Maybe it's selfish, but I want to be the only one in the world who dies. I don't like that it's something everyone does. There should be a way to opt out.

My mom and I avoided it. I guess we both wanted to act like we were just spending time together. We don't talk about serious things. She loves to be silly. I live to be silly. I still sit in her lap when I come home. I nap in the same bed with her. So, I tagged along to pick her up from the hospital and care for her, but she didn't want me there. She's very independent.

Radioactive plaque therapy meant that she was literally radioactive for a week, not allowed to touch anyone. I kept my distance. She insisted I leave the room and see the sights. I'm sure for many people, the insistence that I go have fun would be seen as a positive thing, but for me, it wasn't.

So, I saw a museum about US history. Fact: When they were voting to decide if women should get a vote, they were about to vote 'no,' but at the last moment one guy changed his vote, and when asked why the sudden change, he said that his mother had told him to 'be a good boy and give the women a vote.' It seems like all big things come down to a little thing somewhere along the line.

I was in the museum thinking about how things are right now and how they would describe them in an exhibit a hundred years from now. I bet they'll love that we came up with Scooby-Doo. They'll think it was genius. They'll miss him so much.

Throughout the week, there was a hurricane in New York. It didn't hit Philadelphia, but it did cause some mild wind and rainy weather. An inch of rain total. But it was all over the news. I don't know what the big deal was since it barely hit there. I guess they were just afraid it was going to be worse, so they put out flood warnings and everything. Things like that don't usually happen in Philadelphia. I guess there's a point where things just boil over.

On the last day, she was no longer radioactive. That night we slept in the same bed, snuggled together. I was thinking about us as animals that seem like they would cuddle. Capybara came to mind. And then I thought of animals with pouches for their children.

"If we were Capybaras," I said, "I would live in your pouch. If capybaras have pouches, which I don't think they do."

I was being ridiculous. Of course, I knew they didn't have pouches.

"I didn't know they didn't have pouches. I'd have believed you if you said they did," she

said.

“In that case, I will use my time travel device to go back in time and repeat myself.” I made a time travel noise. “If we were capybaras-- an animal which is factually well documented to have a pouch-- I would live in your pouch.”

We were quiet for a minute, as capybaras tend to be. I shifted around, trying to get comfortable. She spoke.

“They were not sure if it was a melanoma, because the color is unusual. But if it is, there’s a possibility it will metastasize into my liver.”

I didn’t respond.

“It’s a rare form of melanoma, they said. One in every —”

She said a large number. Like that mattered. It only had to happen once, a small thing that became something big.

“I guess I prefer it going to my liver than to my brain. You have to die of something, you know,” she said. “I’m not worried about it, but I know y’all might be.”

She’s in the field of medicine. My mother loves medicine. I love my mother. She’s never supposed to die. She should opt-out. I tried to think about how we might talk about her in the past tense, and I couldn’t even picture it. I could only picture myself pretending she had never existed at all. I don’t know how to talk about someone who existed and then stopped existing. They should teach that in school.

“I love you,” she said, and I didn’t say it back, because I didn’t want my voice to break. But there are things you know without saying them out loud.

I couldn’t sleep. I was tempted to think about other things, but it seemed like one of those moments you’re supposed to be present for. I wanted to opt-out. My mother is the kind of person who is always fine, but nothing ever exceeds her expectations. I think she is fine with death too. We don’t need closure. It should be okay if she dies. I’m just sad because I love my mom, and I wouldn’t love the world as much without her. I went to the bathroom and looked in the mirror. My eyes were red. Like Sam, I thought.

Apes look like people. Rhinos look more like people than people do. I wish people had trunks like elephants. The way they caress each other with their trunks seems so intimate.

I think they should invent a zoo that has no animals. You could go into their exhibits and walk around inside their habitat and experience their lives. The price would be lower, because of less staff. No one likes my idea. Guess it’s one of those things that would only appeal to a small audience.

Love,
Your marsupial friend.

