

Zoo Story

by Jack Swenson

The first thing she wants to see when we arrive at the zoo is the monkey island. The pile of rocks is surrounded by a moat. It's crawling with monkeys. They glide about with the grace of dancers. They chase after miscreants who screech horribly. My lady friend is delighted. She keeps tugging at the sleeve of my jacket, excitedly pointing out what she thinks is some charming antic.

I like the elephants better. I ask my friend if she has ever seen an elephant with an erection. I have, I say. It's enormous, I tell her. The young lady is unmoved by this information.

I tell my friend, the animal lover, not to get too near the panther's cage. "Why not?" she asks. "You'll see," I say. We stand at a safe distance and watch the animal pace. Its yellow eyes are malevolent. Three Asians line up at the rail and intently watch the cat. They look like tourists. Sure enough, the cat turns, hoists his tail, and gives the onlookers a squirt. The visitors can't believe what happened. They are amazed.

The giraffes are a waste of time. The birds, too. I like the polar bears. I think of Spencer Holst's wonderful story about the bears dancing in the moonlight. My friend wants to adopt one of the cubs. I buy her a hotdog and a Coke.

We end up back at the monkey island. I keep my eye on an adolescent monkey who looks like he is up to no good. Mama monkey keeps an eye on him, too. She wants to get a drink of water from the moat, but she keeps looking back at the young one who is a few feet away minding his own business. Doo de doo. He is the picture of innocence.

When the adult leans forward to drink, the little monkey is off the rock in a flash. He dunks the other animal's head into the water, and the chase is on. Up and down the rock pile they go, making a terrible racket. The smaller one screeches like a lunatic. Mama has blood in her eye. The scamp escapes. The adult sits down on a rock. The look on her face is priceless.

I get very excited about this display of animal behavior. I take my friend by the arm; she pulls away. "The experts say animals don't have a sense of humor," I say. "Ha! Shows what they know!" I do a little dance of joy. The young woman looks at me as if I have lost my marbles.

