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As I walked through the door the most insufferable, indescribable, repulsive odor molested my body. I contemplated turning around that very second and walking right back out those doors. Yet, as a moderately mature, twenty-one year old female, I felt it was time to get over my fear; my fear of going to the pet store. Unfortunately, I am entirely, one hundred percent terrified of animals. This may come as a surprise to you because most people adore some type of animal. Even fish scare me! My hatred for animals is mainly because they terrify me. The minute I see an animal within twenty feet of me, my entire body freezes immediately and I start to have trouble breathing. I try not to make this obvious because as I have learned over the years, the world is full of animal loves who cannot understand how I can pass by a cuddly puppy without even a glance.

I wish I cared more for animals and wanted to snuggle with them and pet them. I just don't think I will ever be able to get over my animal anxiety. I tried to blame my anxiety on my parents by complaining to them that they should have taken me to petting zoos as a child so I would have become more comfortable with animals. My mother just laughed at me. Just as I was about to have closed the case of why I've always been so terrified of animals, she unexpectedly reminded me that she and my father took me to countless petting zoos and farms as a child. She even threatened to take out pictures of me petting the lamas and chickens as evidence. I graciously walked away from the situation because pictures of animals freak me out as much as seeing them in real life.

So, I started thinking some more. Why do I have such anxiety when it comes to animals. I mean I guess they're somewhat charming, if you're into that kind of thing. Then I

remembered two different occurrences that truly explain my anxiety with animals. I was in the third grade and my dad and I went on a “father-daughter” trip to Rocking Horse Ranch. Pretty lame as I look back at it now, but at the time I was ecstatic. We thought we would be adventurous to go on a guided tour of the ranch on horseback. Little did I know “Oreo,” the strapping horse I was assigned to ride, had a bit of a temper. After about ten minutes of riding, Oreo went wild and ran away from the group. My little voice screamed as loud as it could while three other guides chased after me.

You may have thought that incidence would have scarred me for life, but I decided to give animals another try. It was the summer of 1998 and I was having the time of my life as a camper at Jeff Lakes Day Camp. I loved every minute of each activity and am still proud to mention that I was awarded camper of the week multiple times throughout my career as a camper. I could not get enough of camp, until one day my group went to the Nature House. In all my years at Jeff Lakes, the nature house always had small animals—some frogs, a guinea pig—nothing too exotic. This year, unbeknownst to me, they expanded into farm animals. Regrettably, I found this out by walking straight into the chicken house. Before I knew it, the door closed behind me and I couldn’t get out. The more I started to freak out the more the chickens went wild. They were squawking their heads off and flying up and down and attacking my hair. I was screaming at the top of my lungs, but as the nature counselor tried to get in, the chicken pandemonium blocked the door from opening. My tiny, eleven year old self was up against what seemed like hundreds of wild chickens (well, actually, I think there were about nine, but who’s counting). I slapped my arms around in the air, but that only made the situation worse. Fortunately, the nature counselor finally saved me from those unruly beasts. I walked away from that incident with scratches on my arms and bird poop in my hair;

yet I consider myself the winner of the battle in that I always make sure to order chicken when I go out for dinner.

With that said, entering the pet store this past weekend was a huge feat for me. After my two past animal fiascos, I prepared myself for all sorts of situations- the animals rebelling and breaking free from their cages or the store closing and me being locked in the store, alone with all of the animals for the entire night. Upon entering the store, I was most surprised by the many corresponding features between this particular pet store and Wegmanns. This pet store was a luxurious shopping experience; similar to the one I usually have at Wegmanns. The one marked difference was that Wegmann's air is filled with delicious smells of hot out of the oven baked breads, honey roasted chicken, freshly brewed coffee, while the most hideous aroma encapsulated this pet store. How could anyone spend a whole day working here! As my mind was telling me to get the hell out of there, my legs kept walking forward. I was going to get over this ridiculous animal anxiety. *I am an adult, these are only gentle animals* was my mantra. I have to admit, I was entirely intrigued by the rows upon rows of leashes, collars, and animal beds. On my way to the aisle where the actual animals were located inside of their cage, I passed their pick 'n' mix section of bird seed that looked strangely similar to the pick 'n' mix candy section at Wegmanns. They even had a deli section that had packages of "dog deli meat" with wrappers that looked outlandishly comparable to Pillsbury chocolate chip cookie dough package. Along with the incredible variety this store offered in food choices for animals, they had a toy aisle that blew Toys R Us out of the park. They had everything from stuffed animals to sports balls to pool toys specifically made for dogs. Ahhh. I was feeling ok. This wasn't so bad. Similar to a day at the supermarket, I just need to bring nose plugs next time. But then, as I turned the corner out

of the “toy aisle” and into the “gourmet pet food aisle” one of the pet store workers who had tattoos that drench every inch of her body interrupted my thoughts.

“Would you like to try duck rice balls?” she said in a monotone voice. I mean, I couldn’t blame her lack of enthusiasm. I tried to hide my disgust. Did she actually want me to try it? Do pet owners bond so much with their pets that they’ll try their food? I guess she could tell by the look on my face that I was not interested. She then responded, “Yeah, I wouldn’t either,” and went back to texting furiously on her Verizon Sidekick.

I continued to walk through the store and I knew I was getting closer to the animals as I started hearing chirping and scuffling. Shivers ran through my body. I wasn’t feeling as calm as I was a few minutes ago in the toy aisle. I knew this store did not have dogs or cats for people to buy, which was actually a relief; but still, guinea pigs, birds, rabbits- all still in the same category of grossness to me. Then, there it was. Staring at me. The rabbit. Sitting in the corner of the glass box it calls a home. The rabbit did not move a millimeter; it just sat there watching me. I did not move a millimeter; I just sat there watching it. I felt like we were in some kind of staring contest. I kept telling my somewhat rational self that it was impossible for the rabbit to get out of his glass cage and pounce on me. I repeated my mantra over and over again in my head- *I am an adult, these are only gentle animals , I am an adult, these are only gentle animals.*

All of the sudden, out of the corner of my eye something from under the rabbit box did move and started darting toward me. I thought it was a dust ball at first, but then I realized it was a cockroach! (And not one that the pet store was selling) Ew! Ew! Ew! That was it for me. I was done. I ran past the parakeets, guinea pigs, chinchillas, cockaties and did not look back. I wanted to give animals one last chance, I really did, but I give up! Instead of putting

up a fight, I ran away. Yes, I “chickened out.” I’ll deal with my animal anxiety another day. Maybe.

As I was about to walk out of the pet store and take in a breath of fresh air, I stopped to look at the adorable baked goods the store had for animals. They had dog treat canolies, donuts, chocolate covered pretzels, cupcakes, and more. Not only did they look like the real item that you would find in a bakery, but also they smelled strangely amazing. Wow, how much fun to buy these cute treats for a dog...who am I kidding! I headed out of the store and back to my car as soon as I could.

Don’t get me wrong here. I don’t think all animals are bad. I even have a dog at home, Marco Polo, who I don’t mind most of the time. We exist in the same quarters, rarely interact, and bother each other seldom, so it works for the two of us. It is funny how animals know who will get down on the floor with them and scratch their bellies, sneak them food under the dinner table and play with them in the yard. Marco Polo knows that we do not do those things together and therefore we happily leave each other alone. He looks to my sister, the animal lover, for all of that. For now, I am going back to animal avoidance whenever I can. I am not opposed to keeping an open mind about it though. Who knows, I may end up being an animal fanatic one-day and buy my pet expensive toys, lavish Halloween costumes, diamond studded collars, and prepare it rich foods. Although, I wouldn't bet on it.

