

Where Zebras are Made

By Robert Von Nordheim

On our first date, Ricky Keller took me to the place where zebras are made. That's what he called it - the petting zoo that his uncles operated. He learned of my deep, unironic love for zebras from an oral report I gave in freshman biology class, and had patiently waited 2 years to exploit it. During that time, 100 zebras were brought to Belleville, and I decided that I really liked chimpanzees more.

The zebras stood behind a chain-link fence mounted with barbed wire. It was built to keep loiterers out of the Keller Bros. glass factory and its empty parking lot; now it securely held a 5-ton mass of monochrome fur and chipped hooves. Occasionally, the zebras tried to shove their snouts between gaps and nibble at golden brown grass poking from pavement cracks. They were tightly packed, with hardly enough room to fan their tails or shake off mosquitoes. The bugs hovered over the pen in clouds, thrilled by the chance to sample African cuisine and introduce their prey to American diseases.

Ricky claimed that even he didn't know where his uncles found 100 zebras. He imagined that they were rescued from an over-ambitious butcher with black market connections. Popular opinion held that they wandered out of the St. Louis Zoo truck that crashed on I-59. Who knows - they might've been white horses with black stripes painted on. "Or black horses with white stripes painted on?" Ricky said, and laughed. Ricky knew how to amuse himself.

The Keller Bros. glass factory is only 2 blocks away from my house, but I never got to see it in action. We moved from Dayton to Belleville eight years ago, after my Dad was stationed at Scott Air Force Base. By then, the factory was well into its twilight years; sun-bleached, with scored green walls that gave it the appearance of a sucked lime.

Every kid in town knew that the building was haunted by the ghost of a laid-off employee, who kidnapped children and slit their throats with defective glass. My school friends refused to walk home with me, hissing and moaning each time the bus passed the industrialized hulk. There wasn't much evidence to support the story, though that first "e" really did look like an "i" in the moonlight. The legend lasted until the Metrolink laid tracks down on East B Street. The entire

block is now lit by the quarter-hourly glare of bullet trains bound for St. Louis; it is obvious that the factory is not haunted, merely ugly.

The factory is a magical place. As a young girl, I would sometimes dream of losing my virginity there, under the loading docks. The actual event would take place 15 days later, on a different piece of Keller estate. Bereft of broken glass and zebra shit, it will be disappointing by comparison.

Ricky poked his skinny, twitching fingers through the fence, nearly sticking them up a zebra's nose. I kissed him, and he just kept laughing. It was bad for me, but I knew things would be much worse for him.