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Untamed

Two summers ago, my wife and I took our daughters to the zoo. As we walked the grounds, we saw a sign advertising the park's big event: the Cheetah Run. We headed toward the families scouting out their viewing spots and found an empty stretch along the route. Our youngest, Amma, hopped up on my wife's shoulders for a better view.

5 A peppy blond zookeeper in a khaki vest appeared. She held a megaphone and the leash of a yellow Labrador retriever. I was confused. I don't know much about animals, but if she tried to convince my kids that this dog was a cheetah, I was getting a Cheetah Run refund.

She began, "Welcome, everybody! You are about to meet our resident cheetah, Tabitha. Do you think this is Tabitha?"

10 "Nooooo!" the kids yelled.

"This sweet Labrador is Minnie, Tabitha's best friend. We introduced them when Tabitha was a baby cheetah, and we raised Minnie alongside Tabitha to help tame her. Whatever Minnie does, Tabitha wants to do."

15 The zookeeper motioned toward a parked jeep behind her. A pink stuffed bunny was tied to the tailgate with a fraying rope.

She asked, "Who has a Labrador at home?"

Little hands shot into the air.

"Whose Lab loves to play chase?"

"Mine!" the kids shouted.

20 "Well, Minnie loves to chase this bunny! So first, Minnie will do the Cheetah Run while Tabitha watches to remember how it's done. Then we'll count down, I'll open Tabitha's cage, and she'll take off. At the end of the route, just a hundred meters that way, there will be a delicious steak waiting for Tabitha."

25 The zookeeper uncovered Tabitha's cage and walked Minnie, eager and panting, to the starting line. She signaled to the jeep, and it took off. She released Minnie's leash, and we all watched a yellow Lab joyfully chase a dirty pink bunny. The kids applauded earnestly. The adults wiped sweat from their foreheads.

30 Finally it was time for Tabitha's big moment. We counted down in unison: "Five, four, three, two, one..." The zookeeper slid open the cage door, and the bunny took off once again. Tabitha bolted out, laser focused on the bunny, a spotted blur. She crossed the finish line within seconds. The zookeeper whistled and threw her a steak. Tabitha pinned it to the ground with her oven-mitt¹ paws, hunkered down in the dirt, and chewed while the crowd clapped.

I didn't clap. I felt queasy. The taming of Tabitha felt... familiar.

35 I watched Tabitha gnawing that steak in the zoo dirt and thought: *Day after day this wild animal chases dirty pink bunnies down the well-worn, narrow path they cleared for her. Never looking left or right. Never catching that damn bunny, settling instead for a store-bought steak and the distracted approval of sweaty strangers. Obeying the zookeeper's every command, just like Minnie, the Lab she's been trained to believe*

¹ oven-mitt: a glove made of thick material, used for holding hot dishes from an oven

she is. Unaware that if she remembered her wildness – just for a moment – she could tear those zookeepers to shreds.

40 When Tabitha finished her steak, the zookeeper opened a gate that led to a small fenced field. Tabitha walked through and the gate closed behind her. The zookeeper picked up her megaphone again and asked for questions. A young girl, maybe nine years old, raised her hand and asked, “Isn’t Tabitha sad? Doesn’t she miss the wild?”

“I’m sorry, I can’t hear you,” the zookeeper said. “Can you ask that again?”

The child’s mother said, louder, “She wants to know if Tabitha misses the wild.”

45 The zookeeper smiled and said, “No. Tabitha was born here. She doesn’t know any different. She’s never even seen the wild. This is a good life for Tabitha. She’s much safer here than she would be out in the wild.”

50 While the zookeeper began sharing facts about cheetahs born into captivity, my older daughter, Tish, nudged me and pointed to Tabitha. There, in that field, away from Minnie and the zookeepers, Tabitha’s posture had changed. Her head was high, and she was stalking the periphery, tracing the boundaries the fence created. Back and forth, back and forth, stopping only to stare somewhere beyond the fence. It was like she was remembering something. She looked regal. And a little scary. Tish whispered to me, “Mommy. She turned wild again.”

55 I nodded at Tish and kept my eyes on Tabitha as she stalked. I wished I could ask her, “What’s happening inside you right now?”

I knew what she’d tell me. She’d say, “Something’s *off* about my life. I feel restless and frustrated. I have this hunch that everything was supposed to be more beautiful than this. I imagine fenceless, wide-open savannas. I want to run and hunt and kill. I want to sleep under an ink-black, silent sky filled with stars. *It’s all so real I can taste it.*”

60 Then she’d look back at the cage, the only home she’s ever known. She’d look at the smiling zookeepers, the bored spectators, and her panting, bouncing, begging best friend, the Lab.

She’d sigh and say, “I should be grateful. I have a good enough life here. It’s crazy to long for what doesn’t even exist.”

I’d say:

65 Tabitha. You are not crazy.
You are a goddamn cheetah.

Four years ago, married to the father of my three children, I fell in love with a woman.

Much later, I watched that woman drive away from my home to meet with my parents and share her plan to propose to me. She thought I didn’t know what was happening that Sunday morning, but I knew.

70 When I heard her car return, I settled into the couch, opened a book, and tried to slow my pulse. She walked through the door and directly toward me, bent down, kissed my forehead. She pushed my hair aside and took a deep breath of my neck, like she always does. Then she stood up and disappeared into the bedroom. I walked to the kitchen to pour some coffee for her, and when I turned around, she was right there in front of me, down on one knee, holding a ring. Her eyes were certain and pleading, wide and laser
75 focused, sky blue, bottomless.

“I couldn’t wait,” she said. “I just could not wait another minute.”

80 Later, in bed, I laid my head on her chest while we talked about her morning. She’d told my parents, “I love your daughter and grandchildren like I’ve never loved before. I’ve spent my entire life searching and preparing myself for them. I promise you that I will love and protect them forever.” My mother’s lip quivered with fear and courage as she said, “Abby. I have not seen my daughter this alive since she was ten

years old.”

Much else was said that morning, but that first response from my mother jumped out at me like a sentence in a novel begging to be underlined:

I have not seen my daughter this alive since she was ten years old.

85 My mother watched the spark in my eyes fade during my tenth year on Earth. Now, thirty years later, she was witnessing the return of that spark. In the past few months, my entire posture had changed. I looked regal to her. And a little scary.

After that day, I began to ask myself: *Where did my spark go at ten? How had I lost myself?*

90 I’ve done my research and learned this: Ten is when we learn how to be good girls and real boys. Ten is when children begin to hide who they are in order to become what the world expects them to be. Right around ten is when we begin to internalize our formal taming.

Ten is when the world sat me down, told me to be quiet, and pointed toward my cages:

These are the feelings you are allowed to express.

This is how a woman should act.

95 This is the body you must strive for.

These are the things you will believe.

These are the people you can love.

Those are the people you should fear.

This is the kind of life you are supposed to want.

100 Make yourself fit. You’ll be uncomfortable at first, but don’t worry – eventually you’ll forget you’re caged. Soon this will just feel like: life.

I wanted to be a good girl, so I tried to control myself. I chose a personality, a body, a faith, and a sexuality so tiny I had to hold my breath to fit myself inside. [...]

I understand myself differently now.

105 I was just a caged girl made for wide-open skies.

I wasn’t crazy. I was a goddamn cheetah.

110 When I saw Abby I remembered my wild. I wanted her, and it was the first time I wanted something beyond what I had been trained to want. I loved her, and it was the first time I loved someone beyond those I had been expected to love. Creating a life with her was the first original idea I’d ever had and the first decision I made as a free woman. After thirty years of contorting myself to fit inside someone else’s idea of love, I finally had a love that fit – custom made for me, by me. I’d finally asked myself what I wanted instead of what the world wanted from me. I felt alive. I’d tasted freedom, and I wanted more.

115 I looked hard at my faith, my friendships, my work, my sexuality, my entire life and asked: How much of this was my idea? Do I truly want any of this, or is this what I was conditioned to want? Which of my beliefs are of my own creation and which were programmed into me? How much of who I’ve become is inherent? How much of the way I look and speak and behave is just how other people have trained me to look and speak and behave? How much of the things I’ve spent my life chasing are just dirty pink bunnies? Who was I before I became who the world told me to be?

120 Over time, I walked away from my cages. I slowly built a new marriage, a new faith, a new worldview, a new purpose, a new family, and a new identity by design instead of default. From my imagination instead of my indoctrination. From my wild instead of from my training.

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