

Wolf Girl

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We were standing in front of the elephants, and I was hungry.

The elephants ate crispy hay, the sun beating down on their gray cracked skin. My dad was mesmerized by these large creatures, pointing and commenting. When I was a girl, I loved going to the zoo. It wasn't often, but when we did, it was magical. The Cleveland Metroparks Zoo and Geauga Lake, the baby cousin of Cedar Point, were really the only excursions we ever went on as a family. Ever since I moved back to Ohio, my dad had been wanting to go back to the zoo with me, just like old times.

Now he stood between me and my fiancé Dave, which I was glad about because I didn't want Dave to see me checking my phone constantly for a message I was sure wouldn't come.

"Can you look like you're at least enjoying yourself?" Dave asked from over my dad's shoulder.

My dad turned to me, sadness in his eyes, his worry lines in his forehead more pronounced. "What's wrong, honey?" He pulled me into a side-hug. I could smell his oily face, oily like mine. My Italian blood reflected in an older face.

"I'm just still really upset about the job." I looked back at the elephants.

"Oh, sweetie, don't think about that right now. Cheer up! Aren't you happy to be here with your dad? You don't see me often!"

My throat constricted. I wanted to confess everything to my dad, and looking back, I might have if Dave hadn't been there. I pulled back from the hug to look at my short dad. Were those new gray hairs? Were there more wrinkles around his face? When did that happen? This change happened like a quiet snow overnight, blanketing my mind to the passage of time. Silently, the world seemed to shift from one season to the next, youthful spring to the winter of life.

Would I be old like my parents someday, divorced, temples graying, wrinkles forming? I didn't want to end up alone, but I didn't see myself with Dave in the winter years of my life.

"I just thought I got the job." I deflected. I grabbed onto the wooden fence separating us from the elephants, the wood hot and dry on my palms. I dug in my nails.

"It's that guy's fault."

"What?"

"That guy who said you did such a great job and made you think you got it. He should have never had said that." Dave said as he looked out at the elephants.

That guy was the one person I was waiting to hear from. *That* guy's name was Tony. I made a point not to look at my phone for a while.

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I only had so many steps for the day. I needed to make sure I hit 10,000, a number that deemed I was safe from gaining weight, a number that proved I did something right. I insisted we walk everywhere instead of taking the shuttle. While Dad and Dave ate burgers that totaled the same number of calories I ate in an entire day, I heard a voice in my head, seductive, tempting. *The less you eat, the closer you'll be to what you want.*

We continued walking, passing the tortoises, which seemed significant since we had a tortoise. Dave was delighted, but all I kept thinking about was how Tony teased me for having a tortoise.

His smile.

No. I wouldn't think of that.

The voice returned. Hunger, fasting, movement. If I lost more weight, there would be some tangible answer to this pain.

We continued walking, people passing us in their own worlds. I was so absorbed in my own pool of existence. Normally I liked looking at people, imaging their stories, smiling at happy children, walking with my head up.

But I was walking with my head down like a beat-up horse.

Then, we reached the wolf house.

It was 1997 when I first came here with my parents. This exhibit was brand new then, a hunter's wooden lodge with giant evergreens surrounding it.

Families passed us on either side, oblivious to the flashback running in my head.

I'm six years old and running up to the Wolf Wilderness. I'm wearing my Wolf Wilderness t-shirt, a wolf proudly displayed on my chest. I've brought my plastic Halloween wolf mask in hopes of appearing like a wolf in front of the real ones. Maybe they'll adopt me into their pack, and I'll live out the rest of my days with the wolves.

Dad is trailing behind me. He's excited about the wolves too. My mom is trudging behind him. She's not a fan of running.

We enter the cabin, and there are so many people inside wanting to get a glimpse of the gray wolves. My dad helps push me to the front where we enter a room that has one huge window. Glass spans the entire wall to look out into the Wolf Wilderness. I search and search with my eyes, hoping to see one.

Then, suddenly, I do.

They're not as majestic as I had pictured. It's nothing like the wolves in the movie *Balto*, where the white wolf howls with *Balto* making him connect with his inner-wolf. It will be years until I realize *Balto* was actually not a wolf.

"Oh look, Steph! There's one right there!" My dad is bending down next to me, our cheeks side by side. I can feel his prickly whiskers already reemerging since this morning's shave. This wolf looks just like a dog but with extremely pointy ears.

We look at the wolf together, the soft, fox-like face gazes directly at us for a moment, blinks, yawns, and then lies down.

I can't believe I'm seeing an actual wolf. I put on my plastic mask to see if my magic works.

I only smell the plastic, an odd melted rubbery scent that I will only ever associate with this mask. I can't see too well out of it, so I abandon the idea of joining forces with the wolves. I'll just be wolf-girl in the human form roaming the human wild.

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"Steph! Look there's one right there!" My dad said now, over twenty years later as we stood in the same spot young daughter and father spied on the wolves. I wanted to cry.

Could this be the same wolf I looked at as a young girl? Probably not, but I imagined it was. Why couldn't the wolf let me know all the things I would need to know throughout those 20 years? The woman who was standing there now was not the same girl as before.

I was no longer the wolf-girl in the human form roaming the human wild. Wolves don't starve themselves on purpose. Wolves hunt. Wolves go for what they want.

Dave slouched in the corner, done with the wolves.

"I could just sit here all day and watch them," my dad said. I gave him a side-squeeze.

“Me too.”

Dave left the observation room, unable to take the crowded space anymore. Dad and I continued to look out at the wilderness, at that wolf. Something inside me tugged. I was being pulled back outside with Dave. Anxiety filled me as I thought about letting him down. I didn't want to set him off. I needed to be a good girl. Sometimes I felt like I was on some invisible leash. If I tried to do something I cared about, Dave would tug on my leash. If I tried to make plans with friends, Dave would tug on my leash. Tug. Tug. Tug.

Back outside, I saw the bronze statue of Balto that had been installed in front of the exhibit. The metal fur faded and smoothed from so many tiny hands petting it. I was petting it now too, remembering being that little girl here with her dad.

“I'm ready to leave,” Dave said.

“But we just started,” I said, confused.

Dave started walking away without another word.

“What's his problem?” My dad asked.

I sighed heavily, “I don't know. Sometimes he just walks away.”

“Well, that's fine thanks I get for paying for his ticket,” my dad said. “Is he always like this?”

I didn't answer immediately, afraid I was disclosing too much about our relationship. “Yeah, he kind of is.” I couldn't look at my dad. I wanted him to like my chosen partner. I wanted him to say how much he liked Dave, that he would be proud to call him his son-in-law someday.

Except, he didn't.

I was torn between two dimensions.

After the zoo, we all agreed to go out to eat with Grandma. We decided to go to a local favorite, Pickle Bills. Despite the name, there aren't any pickles, just seafood. It's a crazy eclectic place with dressed up mannequins, zany movie posters, and Christmas lights everywhere. My cousin's band was playing there tonight, so we figured it was the best place to go.

Once we got there, even though it was August, I was freezing. I needed to stay in the sun like a reptile to keep any warmth. Luckily, the band was playing outside.

The music started up, and I felt like myself for two seconds. The Stephanie of yesteryear. I wanted to go on the dance floor now. But, with who? Certainly not Dave, who was already logging in to Pokémon Go to catch new water Pokémon since we were right by the water.

I didn't come here to play a stupid game.

A server took us to an inside table, and I was certain I was going to shiver to death. I scooted into the booth first and my small, Sicilian grandma followed after me. I imagined what a beauty she must have been, thick black mane and a petite, curvy frame. Full lips and dark eyes. A majestic huntress. Her hips carried two sons and more burdens. The Matriarch of our family. I should have asked her more then, sitting in that booth, but instead, all I could think about was avoiding the fried dough bread that smelled like heaven before me. It was the Body of Christ itself. Pull the doughy goodness and spread warm cinnamon butter on it.

I will not.

I heard the music outside, the drums pounding in time, a guitar keeping rhythm. I looked at my dad, then at Dave. I saw nothing of myself reflected in him. Italian men are unctuous and swarthy. Their skin is as rich as oil made from wild olives. Wild.

As I sat there, I felt aviary, hollow. I needed something to fill me, an inspiration, a spark. *I'm denying my heritage*, I thought. *I'm supposed to be curvy, womanly, sexy*. For one moment I thought, maybe I should eat the bread. My mouth desired a food and a tongue that felt like home.

“Steph, what do you think you’re going to get?” Dave asked me from across the table.

Dave looked like a giant among us, his head so much higher at the table.

“Um, I’m not sure.” I hadn’t looked up any calories yet, so I couldn’t possibly decide. Dave liked how thin I looked. Tug. Tug. Tug.

“I’m getting the only thing you get when you come here: all you can eat crab legs,” my dad announced. Jealousy filled me as I thought about eating crab leg after crab leg, something my dad and I used to do when we would come here.

Grandma, oddly enough, picked chicken fingers and fries. I suppose because she never really ate deep-fried food. If Grandma could eat deep-fried food, couldn’t I?

I looked at my phone, no notifications, and searched:

How many calories in swordfish? 146 calories

How many calories in shrimp? 99 calories

How many calories in perch? 54 calories

Fried perch? 195 calories

Calories in king crab legs --- not all you can eat. 522 calories

Perch it was, with a side of veggies. Essentially nothing. I thought I looked controlled, better than everyone. But, inside, I was dying. I wanted the music outside. I wanted the water. I wanted a lover who strummed his guitar the same way he strummed my heart, who drummed his fingertips on my skinny hips. I wanted someone who licked my wounds.

I was taken away to a fantasy, far away from the table. I imagined a guitar waiting patiently in the night in the corner of my room as Tony and I became wrapped up in each other. A humid breeze drifting through my curtains, some ancient thing calling us home to be together.

My stomach growled, but I didn't care. I only wanted to sit in a tub, between his hairy legs, arms resting on his thighs, rub my head on his stomach, purify my sins with some baptism. I'd let him into my mind, pull out the bad memories and replace them with new ones.

Together we'd roam the wilderness, pine trees tall around us. Untamed, feral.

I wanted him to message me as I sat there with my dad, my grandma, and my future husband. Just a flirt. I wanted something more. I wanted our hands, butterfly from food, to tickle one another's palms, our legs entwined like Italian Baroque statues.

"Stephanie, why don't you eat some more!" my grandma said, breaking me out of my reverie. "You need to put some meat on these bones!" Her wrinkled hand grasped my wrist, indicating just how small I had gotten.

She didn't think I was beautiful.

I realized I didn't want to be the prey anymore.