

MOOON'S JAWS wrapped swiftly around the back of my knee. His four canines clamped down, digging into the soft flesh of the joint. I stamped my shovel against frozen ground, shouted and whirled around fast enough to scare him off. I found him standing about ten paces away beneath the shadow of a large pine, where he was staring at me curiously out of chestnut-brown eyes surrounded by soft, sandy fur that gave his face such an innocuous, dog-like quality.

Part wolf, part dog, Moon was silent on the approach. Or maybe I was just preoccupied. Definitely preoccupied, enough so that I had, without much thought, turned my back on him. Just minutes before I had been sitting on a rock with Moon behind me, rubbing his scent onto my head, his canines grazing my skull as his cheeks transformed my hair into knots with pound after pound of his crown on mine. It was only when I began to fill in a hole in the enclosure that he used those teeth against me.

Though I had worked with captive-bred wolves at a wildlife sanctuary for over two years without any incident and was well versed in animal care—I even trained new volunteers to avoid this very circumstance—here I was with three weeks left at the sanctuary, finding myself in a wolf's jaws.

The power of a wolf's bite is measured at 1,500 pounds of bone-crushing pressure per square inch—twice that of a German shepherd's, and strong enough to chew through a moose femur. A human's jaw pressure? Merely 120 pounds per square inch. And though wolves have just ten more teeth than us, those forty-two chompers are likely their most widely recognized, feared, and celebrated feature.

What big teeth you have!

Wolves are natural opportunists. They hunt the young, the old, and the sick, strengthening their prey populations and promoting healthy ecosystems by keeping herds on the move and picking off the weak.

I gave Moon an opportunity.

He was new to our pack. Rescued from an animal hoarder along with his sister and two pups, Moon and his family were taken to a shelter where they were neglected by staff due to fear of the wolf that dwelled in each. That's when they were turned over to us, a refuge in rural New Mexico focused on rescuing wolves and other wild canines from the exotic pet trade, providing lifetime sanctuary, and educating people about the *lobo*. We didn't quite know Moon's personality yet, but he had a reputation for being naughty, sometimes charging female caretakers only to dart past them at the last moment. Testing his bounds.

It was my fault for turning my back. I knew that. I also knew that I was lucky. I still had my leg, and walked backward out of the habitat, shovel in front of me until I had safely locked the double set of gates. Moon never moved from his position, just watched me with a kind of satisfied grin that seemed almost lustful. I'd seen that same look once before, the only other time I was ever bitten, a far more serious incident with an Arctic wolf, another situation I had created not out of ignorance, but wholly arrogance. That was years prior, when I was a volunteer for the organization, and another opportunity I gave away.

That time, I was visiting Snow after working hours. While this was allowed, it meant no one else was in earshot, leaving me vulnerable. Strike one. Strike two: despite my knowledge of Snow's notoriously mischievous behavior, I failed to bring a shovel into the habitat—a tool that could be used as a barrier between human and wolf, if needed, but never to harm. I would realize strike three—no radio—only when it was too late. Though he was raised at the sanctuary from a pup and was relatively well socialized to the point that he even enjoyed human contact, Snow had bitten people before, and at about three years old, he was in his prime. In wolf lives, that's the sweet spot of adolescence when pups becoming adults are testing other pack members to see where they stand.

I can recall the exact moment I saw something

change. I had been petting Snow, which I thought he liked, until he walked away, only to return with an enormous grin, and a flash in his sunny amber eyes that bore his full intentions. The sanctuary was silent except for the occasional caw of ravens and the gentle bow of trees against the wind. I could hear his thoughts. I knew he was going to bite me. Calmly, I attempted to retreat, but was too far from the gate when he lunged, grabbing my right arm. I yelled and tried to make myself bigger, to appear imposing, but that only seemed to further entice him, because next he snapped at my right thigh, ripping my jeans and drawing blood. The energy was ratcheting up, and Snow was clearly getting excited. In quick succession, he snatched the loose fabric around my abdomen and began pulling me by my zip-up hoodie farther into the habitat.

All of this was instinctive, all of it the way a wolf would take down prey in the wild, first buckling the limbs, then going for the gut. I concentrated on staying on my feet. I knew what could happen if I didn't.

I had forgotten my radio and couldn't call for help. I continued to yell, but that served me nothing. By this time, all of the wolves in the neighboring habitats were wildly pacing their fence lines and howling as they watched and gossiped about what unfolded. Snow let go of my shirt and grabbed my left arm, tearing fabric and flesh. More blood. With his jaws engaged I was able to unzip my sweatshirt with my right hand and throw it toward him, hoping this would satisfy him. It did. He let go and eagerly seized his prize, running it to the back of the habitat, where he proceeded to shred the sweatshirt with glee. Royal blue cotton spread around him, almost comically, like the thick cloud swirling around the Tasmanian devil.

I escaped with minimal injuries. That was, until the morning I turned my back on Moon. I was lucky again only to receive what I would call a gentle warning; wolves have incredible control over their jaws, and neither had inflicted their full force on me. Though they certainly could have.

Again, my arrogance, not my ignorance, had done me in. I had the rules so well memorized I could recite them if asked. One of those being: never turn your back on an animal.

I can look back now, almost two years to the date, and see that I was both overly confident and distracted. My husband and I were weeks away from leaving the sanctuary to backpack through Asia for the following

six months. We didn't know what we would do or where we would go once we returned, and all the tension of leaving our jobs, home, securities, and comforts behind us was mounting. This anxiety was half of what caused me to turn my back on a wolf. The other half was simply my belief that I was experienced enough to bend the rules without consequence. I slipped up, and got caught displaying the very arrogance that led animals like Moon and Snow into captivity in the first place—I overlooked their wildness. And for that, I paid, just as we are all paying for our unwavering belief in human dominance. The destruction of our wilderness has undoubtedly led to something else, too: that is, the fundamental loss of our individual wildness.

At the sanctuary, we called this complacency syndrome; a bite was always regarded as the result of human error. Complacency syndrome was something we warned each other against: never get too comfortable, and never underestimate the wolves. After all, they are wild and unpredictable, whether they were born into captivity or not. We are always to respect their nature, and we were trained to expect the unexpected, to be ever-present, and to never be caught off guard.

My mistakes left me with two faint scars and a much deeper lesson in boundaries, including the realization that I had invited Moon to violate mine.

As caretakers, the onus is on us to be attentive and follow the rules, thereby avoiding any altercations with the rescues. Further measures are also taken such that only the most experienced staff members care for the highest-risk residents, like those with a history of aggression. For their part, the animals are never expected to be anything but what they are: innately wild yet captive wolves and wolf-dogs living in a fundamentally unnatural state.

In response, staff and volunteers are taught to respect the boundaries of the animals, to never impose socialization on the rescues, and to always let them dictate their level of comfort with us. At the same time, we are to assert our own authority, to take control over our tools and our bodies, and to never allow the rescues to take advantage of us. That means knowing how to avoid creating opportunities for them to do so, as I had when I turned my back on Moon and when I entered Snow's habitat without a tool or radio after hours.

But my boundaries were also personal. Over my time at the sanctuary the daily practice of upholding boundaries taught me to put up the necessary walls

to protect my inner sanctity. I slowly gained the confidence to allow relationships that weighed me down to fall away. I stopped inviting people to take advantage of me and confronted troubles plaguing the relationships I cared for most. I set boundaries around my artistic time and quit giving in to social pressures, letting go of what was no longer important.

All this created the space to rediscover and reconnect with my own inner wildness, a wildness that we all crave but that seems increasingly tamped down by our modern world. Our complacency in the status quo, often leading to stagnation, is much a part of that.

In canid anatomy, jaw pressure is indicated by the size of the animal's sagittal crest, a pointy ridge crowning the skull. This helmet-like peak at the sagittal suture is found in many species of mammals and reptiles that rely on powerful jaws to catch their prey. And while a wolf's jaw pressure is a major asset, jaw pressure in humans is often associated with pain, affliction, and malady. The National Institute of Health estimates

that approximately ten million Americans suffer from TMJ, or temporomandibular joint and muscle disorders, characterized as jaw tightness, clicking, clenching, grinding, soreness, and the like.

Jaw pressure is all about gripping, clutching, and holding on, especially for predators like the wolf who rely on the strength of their mandibles for sustenance. In this way, our mouths serve as a physical gateway between our inner and outer worlds, a literal boundary through which we can speak our truth, nourish body and soul, and express our affection for others. Yet tight jaws in humans are often a sign of stress exhibiting itself in the body, a physical manifestation of an inner constricting likely corresponding to a feeling of violated boundaries in one's outer world.

Like the sanctuary's wolves, each living in a landscape not suited for them, we are all caged in some way, by our beliefs, bodies, societies, jobs, fears, religions, relationships, finances, or other life circumstances. To break through those bars requires us to reconnect with our deepest, wildish selves, beginning with the unleashing of our own inner voice, our purest howl. ♡