

The Animal Lover at Seven and Thirty-Seven

by Hannah Melin

When Avery grows up, she will be an “animal rescuer, just like her Mom!” Every adult in Avery’s life is assigned an animal: a kangaroo for her father, a vulture for her mother. For the first week as her babysitter, I am watched cautiously from behind a stuffed lion. After a week of careful consideration, I am labeled a zebra.

No jokes are made about Erin’s title as a vulture. Erin grins and swings Avery around in a hug when she correctly recites a fact on the wingspan of an African Condor or the lifecycle of a Common Turkey Vulture. Above their television set, framed photos of Avery in diapers are mixed in with fuzz-headed owlets, fledgling eagles, and newly hatched vultures. Foot-long, sleek black feathers are tucked between well-worn romance novels and dog-training guides.

Avery’s hands are always ready to grip, touch, and pet. She pinches her crayons tightly between her fingers, drawing savannas with thick, heavy lines. The skin that stretches across her palms is porcelain pale, interrupted only by light freckles. Erin’s hands grip lightly. Arthritis, she says, from zoo work. The skin is paper-thin and as pale as her daughter’s. Scratch marks and scars cover her thin hands, running up past her wrist and onto her forearm. The razor-width cuts seem to track decades of self-harm, a conclusion dismissed only by the photograph of a younger Erin holding up her forearm for a massive Horned Owl to perch.

Avery sinks into the comfy couch, immersed in a Disney movie while Erin leans against the kitchen counter, staring into her coffee mug while I sip from mine. She talks about the latest tragedy at Animal Kingdom: an aggressive male Grant’s Zebra broke out of his holding pen in the night and into the pen of a resting mother and her three-month-old foal. It trampled the foal to death and ripped off the mother’s right ear. She tears up, covering her mouth as she tells me how the mother whinnied and bayed for hours. She’s furious that the locks weren’t strong enough, but she never blames the

male. It's a survival mechanism, she says, to ensure their genetic line survives. A female won't mate with a male if she has a foal. The male will kill the foal to confirm his own lineage. She's glad no keepers tried to intervene during his rampage; she's certain they'd have been trampled. The attack never makes the newspapers and I try not to wince when Avery gives me a crayon drawing of my animal avatar.

Avery knows to ask owners if she can pet their dogs before approaching. She assures me that she knows lions, leopards, and tigers are all deeply dangerous creatures. She scoops up Rosie, a Chilean Rose-Haired Tarantula the size of my fist, without hesitation. She giggles as the fanged spider walks across her hands. She asks me if I want to hold her. I decline, but I do let Valentine, a six-inch Corn Snake, wrap around my wrist. Once I'm preoccupied with the small warmth making its way to my fingertips, Avery plops Mr. Bojangles, a six-pound Bearded Dragon, on my shoulder. It scrambles on my t-shirt and falls asleep, staining my sleeve with raspberry juice. Raspberries are its second favorite snack, after live crickets.

Avery's best friends are carried around with her at all times. A balding stuffed zebra, a lion Beanie Baby, and a dull yellow dog. If she moves from the room, she scoops them up in her forearms and lines them up in their new position. She engages in a constant dialogue with them. If I ask one of the stuffed animals a question, she responds in a squeaking character voice, but her personal conversations with them are one-sided. She speaks to them, pauses, and continues on with a new talking point. She doesn't see the point in giving them voice when she already knows what they would say. Erin thinks she'll grow out of it any day now.

Erin attended a parent-teacher meeting last month, where one of Avery's teachers was concerned by Avery's introversion. She's the same as Erin was at that age, Erin recalls. Erin seems proud to tell me that Avery prefers animals to people.

Three months later, Snowball, their twelve-year-old house cat, drops dead in front of her food bowl. Erin sobs into her pillow. It's too much, she says. Such reactions adds to her belief that her husband will leave her. She thinks her ex-boyfriend has been stalking her ("Make sure you lock the doors," she tells me, "but I don't think he'd hurt you"). She's convinced Avery will spend the rest of her life talking to stuffed animals. She thinks she's going to lose her job because of her arthritis. To not work with animals,

she says, that would be worse than death for me.

I tell my mother what Erin said on the car ride home. My mother has to pick me up when I watch Avery into the evenings. I'm not allowed to drive at night until I'm old enough to get my Class D.

Avery chases their Pitbull mix around the yard, whooping and giggling. The sun glints off her hair, turning it into a writhing, glimmering halo. She stretches open her arms, inviting the dog to jump onto her and knock her into the grass. The dog does not bite, but he plays rough. Pink ridges rise across her upper arms where his dewclaw scrapes, not quite deep enough to draw blood. He shoves into her side, hard, but she tackles him back, squealing.

At age seven, the animal lover knows no fear. She does not bother to adjust for the rest of us. She spends recess hunting for garter snakes and doesn't bother with the comments made about her on the swing set. She lets every creature, ant and elephant alike, crawl into her heart.

At age thirty-seven, the animal lover learns the weight of these creatures. She lets every one of them into her heart and onto her skin. They leave more scars than she can count.

(The names in this essay have been changed to protect the identities of those featured.)



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