

Contents

Introduction to the Chase	1
Chapter 1 – Pink and Furless	5
Chapter 2 – The Decision	12
Chapter 3 – Sizing Up the Competition	16
Chapter 4 – Man vs. Horse	22
Chapter 5 – To Pee or Not to Pee	26
Chapter 6 – Death by Muck	32
Chapter 7 – Talkin’ Turkey	43
Chapter 8 – A Well-Placed Bullet	51
Chapter 9 – Message Via Bunny-Post	60
Chapter 10 – Wild Humans	67
Chapter 11 – A Short-Lived Victory	74
Chapter 12 – Humility	76
Chapter 13 – Cow Balls	83
Chapter 14 – Four Minutes of Apnea	87
Chapter 15 – Lessons from the Driftless Zone	95
Chapter 16 – Hell Hill	105
Chapter 17 – Getting Some Perspective	114
Chapter 18 – Dumpster Diving	126

Chapter 19 – A Really Stupid Idea	135
Chapter 20 – And on the Seventh Day . . .	138
Chapter 21 – Turkey Time	143
Chapter 22 – Chasing Turkeys	151
Chapter 23 – To Become a Tiger	161
Chapter 24 – Hallucinations	168
Chapter 25 – Hypothermia	175
Chapter 26 – Mr. Survival	182
Chapter 27 – The Usefulness of Urine	188
Chapter 28 – Who’s the Turkey Now?	193
Chapter 29 – Into the Cold	199
Chapter 30 – Touching the Ghost Bird	209
Chapter 31 – Michelob and Chaser	213
Chapter 32 – Capture!	223
Chapter 33 – Waking Up	237
Chapter 34 – Coming Home	242
Acknowledgments	251

Introduction to the Chase

My daughters insist that all stories should begin with “once upon a time”. Though this tale took place years before they were born, and at the time of this writing they’ve never yet heard the story told, they are already beginning to explore the boundary between wild and civilized. Grown-ups cry out in alarm when our girls bend to pet a bumblebee, but they know the secrets of befriending wild creatures – even those with stingers. When I began my adventure to catch a wild turkey, I was not quite so adept at making friends with the wild. I still believed that a human, with enough training and willpower, could overpower the forces of the nature. Now, of course, I know much better.

If you find this tale too unlikely, or the writer too foolish, it is only a report of true events. I can’t say that I’m proud of everything that happened, and I’ll hardly appear as the hero that I envisioned when I began this quest. But here is the story, and I will begin it as my daughters insist stories begin.

Once upon a time, on a blustery winter evening, I was struck with a realization. It went something like this: life doesn't always fall apart in big pieces. Sometimes, it erodes at the edges, with nearly-invisible hairline fractures creeping in. The result is a slow sag. We know something is wrong – we just don't know what it is.

That was the feeling I had as I sat staring at my computer. I was writing a grant that would aid homeless people in the Twin Cities, but the words weren't behaving properly. They were morphing before my eyes, scrawling themselves out in the form of an alien text. It was my twelfth grant proposal in almost as many weeks. Obviously, I was burning out.

“Ugh,” I moaned, looking over to my wife. Her tall, graceful form was bent over a computer just across the room. Half of our home office was her web design studio, and her screen was full of color and shapes. I looked back at my grant proposal.

“Rebecca, I think I've been at the computer too long,” I said.

She smiled, then glanced over as the window suddenly rattled in its frame. “The wind feels like it's about to blow the house over,” she said.

I sat back in my chair and rubbed my eyes. “Yeah,” I said. “It sounds pretty miserable out there. Wish I was out in it.”

Rebecca watched me for a while as I gazed out the window. She could tell something was wrong. I was spending more and more time in these dark moods, longing for . . . something.

Something primal and real, something that would define me as a human being instead of a cog in the huge machine that was the modern United States.

I knew I wasn't the only person in the world feeling this. It's a symptom of our culture, a culture with no rites of passage, no initiation into adulthood. At some point all of us peek out from the distractions of our civilization, and the Big Questions tumble down over us. Why are we here? What mark will I leave upon this world? Is it really all about maintaining a good credit rating?

The window rattled again, and I watched the snow thrashing about just outside the glass. In Wisconsin we usually get a couple of storms like this every year. A "white-out" we call them, when the wind whips the snow into a frenzy, and you're lucky to see your hand if you hold it right in front of your face. It was dangerous weather, and it frightened me to realize how much I wanted to run out into it barefoot, just to feel the cold pierce my skin.

Rebecca's voice cut into my thoughts. "Maybe we need a vacation. We could save up . . ." But her voice trailed away. Both of us knew that a vacation wasn't happening anytime soon. I smiled, but it was a tired smile. I set my fingers back on the keyboard and resumed my typing.

That night Rebecca slept softly beside me, her blonde hair splayed over the pillow. I listened to the house creaking with each gust of wind, and out of the storm memories surfaced and churned. Memories of adventures with my younger brother Nathan. As children, we explored forests and swamps together, battling orcs and dragons with mullein swords. But as we grew

older, life became a lot less adventurous, at least for me. While Nathan was trekking through the Gobi desert or plotting ways to sneak into Tibet, I was “making a living”, trying to make ends meet in a life that seemed hopelessly dull in comparison. My biggest adventure this week consisted of trying to fix our furnace, while Nathan was kayaking off the coast of Mexico.

I lay there wondering what I was doing with my life. I was thirty-five years old – too young to have a midlife crisis – but that’s sure what it felt like. Nathan was living a life of adventure. He had the courage to do something that defined his life, like the woman who buys a rickety sailboat and sails around the world, or the man who quits his job and becomes a world-renowned artist. Or all those people who climb Mount Everest.

I sighed. All I had to look forward to was another ten-hour day at the computer. I was stuck in boring old Wisconsin, with bills to pay and a house in constant need of repair.

What I needed was a goal. A quest to define my life and give it meaning. Something roughly equivalent to climbing Mount Everest . . .

Chapter One

Pink and Furless

In the morning, the world was white. We had an appointment in town, and Rebecca looked skeptically out the window. Lacking a garage, there was only a pile of snow where our Subaru was supposed to be.

“No problem,” I assured her as we tromped out. “Just wait and observe the power of all-wheel drive.”

“Honey, I think we need to shovel. There’s no way we’re getting out the driveway.”

“Trust me.”

I brushed away just enough snow to open her door, let her in, and repeated the same procedure on my side.

“Aren’t you going to at least brush off the windshield?”

“That would take all the fun out of it!” I started the car, threw it into reverse, and stepped on the gas. Nothing.

“We’re stuck,” Rebecca said matter-of-factly.

Pink and Furless

“I just need to rock it a bit . . .” Forward. Reverse. Forward. Reverse. Slowly the car began to plow its way through the drift until I had enough room to get up some speed. A moment later we careened onto the road, snow billowing everywhere.

I smiled. “See? No shovels necessary.”

“No, I can’t see,” Rebecca replied, “due to the three feet of snow piled on our hood.”

“It will be fine,” I assured her. “It will blow off when we drive!”

I had to lean out the window to see where we were going, but I managed to bring us safely to the stop sign at the end of our country road. For the moment, my thirst for adventure was fulfilled by the all-too-typical male fantasy of piloting a machine that could kick nature’s butt. Still, snow was completely covering the windshield, and Rebecca gave me a look that told me it was time to get out and start brushing. Instead, I turned on the windshield wipers. They struggled against the white fluff until we could finally see the road in front of us. I readied a smug smile, but before I could deliver it, I caught sight of something up ahead. In the field at the end of the road, a great, feathered creature was moving through the snow. Its reptilian feet sunk into the powder so that it struggled, chest-deep, across the wind-blown expanse.

Some might suggest that the huge bird was too stupid to realize it could fly, but I knew the truth. It was too noble to take the easy route. It would walk the entire length unless some dire threat made it unfold its immense wings and take to the sky. This animal needed no machine to move through the winter world. It

Chasing Turkeys

was perfectly equipped by nature.

“Look at that thing,” I breathed. “It’s like a velociraptor.”

“It’s a turkey, honey.”

I pursed my lips and nodded. Then I looked over at Rebecca.

“Do you suppose I’d be able to catch one of those?” I asked her.

She raised a brow questioningly.

“Yeah,” I said. “Run after it. Catch it. Then let it go.”

She gave me another of those special looks that reminded me I could probably qualify for psychiatric treatment.

“If you want to do something useful,” she said, “why don’t you get out and brush the snow off the car?”

As impossible and pointless as chasing a wild animal might seem, I wasn’t alone. I had been reading a book by Scott Carrier, who had been chasing pronghorn antelope out West for years. This creature is often cited as the world’s second fastest land animal, capable of running 60 mph or more. It is out-sprinted only by the cheetah, which can achieve 70 mph, but while the cheetah quickly tires, the pronghorn can keep a strong pace for miles. Anyone who thought they could run down an animal like that was clearly mad. But like me, Scott had a brother.

David Carrier was developing a theory of how endurance running played an integral part in human evolution. In Scott’s book, *Running After Antelope*, he recounts David telling him,

Pink and Furless

“I’ve found ethnographic accounts of primitive people who were able to do it. The Tarahumara in Mexico could run down deer, the Aborigines in Australia could run down kangaroo, the Goshutes and Papago here in the West are said to have been able to run down pronghorn antelope. I tried it last summer with some antelope in Wyoming, just for an hour or so, and they basically ditched me, but I want to try it again. I could use some help if you want to do it.”

Reading Scott’s book was oddly familiar, because Nathan and I had been chasing animals – deer in particular – since we were little. Our childhood consisted primarily of pretending we were wild animals. We wished we had been born with paws and tails and coats of fur. Encased in our pink, furless bodies, we’d look down at our clawless fingers and watch squirrels run straight up trees.

This infused us with a desperate sense of envy.

Despite the fact that we were trapped in the hopelessly inadequate forms of human bodies, we made the best of things. We couldn’t scamper up trees as fast as a chipmunk, we couldn’t hear as well as a fox, and we certainly couldn’t fly like crows. But we could run. And run we did.

We called it “deer-running.” We’d wander deep into the forest to a place we had never seen before, and then we’d start off as fast as we could. With the first few steps we were just kids in Nikes, but then something would transform, and suddenly we were wild animals. The fastest ones in the woods. We’d fly through the forest, heedless of briars and sticks. We’d scramble down gullies, leap over

Chasing Turkeys

rocks, splash through streams. We weren't allowed to slow down if we saw something daunting up ahead. We had to plunge right into it and trust in our agility and childhood resilience to bring us through alive.

During those moments, we discovered something very strange about human nature. It was the act of allowing – not trying – that gave us the ability to run with such skill. By maintaining a curious sort of loose concentration, by not focusing on anything in particular, we could negotiate even the most extreme terrain. But if even for a single moment we thought about what we were doing, everything fell apart. We'd tumble head over heels and come to rest staring up at the sky, twigs sticking out of our hair and bruises over half our bodies.

Later we'd walk home, proudly comparing the scratches we'd received and trying to estimate how many pints of blood we'd lost.

It was during these early days that our father told us a story of a marathon runner who managed to run down a deer. After running the deer to exhaustion, he walked up and touched it gently on the nose. Nathan and I entertained the idea that we, too, might someday run a deer to exhaustion, and whenever we saw a deer, we'd give chase. The deer always left us far behind, but we knew we'd grow stronger and faster as the years passed.

We never caught our deer. But as we got older, Nathan began to talk about catching a turkey instead. We'd be driving along a country road, see a gathering of turkeys, and he'd invariably say, "I bet you could run one of those down."

He seemed sure that it would be easy, and Nathan is the sort

Pink and Furless

of person who should know about these things. With his boyish good looks and a physique straight out of an REI advertisement, he had lived in remote Mongolian villages, flirted with death in Kashmir, and searched for tigers in the Nepalese Terai. He'd often told me of an encounter he had with wild turkeys while exploring one of our favorite haunts in Wisconsin – Kinnikinnic State Park.

“I could have whomped one over the head if I'd had a stick,” he said. “They just stood there. They have no brains. If we're ever lost in the woods, we'll just eat turkey.”

“You think so?” I asked.

“Sure. They're dumb!”

That's what most people think about turkeys. They're dumb. And from a distance, they certainly don't look impressive. They're big brown birds with vacant eyes and rather ugly, featherless heads. A closer look, however, and those brown feathers glow with iridescent green and orange. The vacant eyes reveal a deep chestnut iris and are always scanning about with keen awareness. Even the ugly heads become interesting, especially considering that they are equipped with snoods. No, this isn't something invented by Dr. Seuss. It's an odd growth of unknown purpose that sticks out from the top of a turkey's beak, growing longer or shorter at a moment's notice.

This was the creature that Nathan suggested would be easy to catch. It was fine to watch the turkeys from the car window and imagine giving chase. But what would happen, I wondered, if I got out of the car and really tried it?

Now, as I sat with Rebecca at the end of our country road

Chasing Turkeys

and watched the turkey make its way across the field, I realized that this was my challenge. I would go out into the woods – just me against a wild turkey – and see what the human animal was capable of. Like Scott Carrier chasing pronghorns or my brother venturing into the world’s loneliest corners, I would break free of the chains of my computer desk and catch a turkey.

This was my Mount Everest.

There was just one tiny, troubling fact. Thousands of climbers had been to the top of Everest. But nowhere could I find any instance of a human chasing down a healthy wild turkey.

Apparently, it had never been done.

Undaunted, I laid down the basic plan. Like a marathon runner, I’d train for the race, and then go out on some auspicious weekend and run after a turkey until it staggered to an exhausted heap of feathers. I’d reach down and lift the limp bird into my arms, walk home to show Rebecca, and then carry the turkey back to let it go. I smiled as I imagined how word of my feat would spread. I might even have to sharpen up my autograph-signing skills!

I had no idea what I was getting myself into.

Chapter Two

The Decision

I'm really going to do it, Rebecca. I'm going to chase down a turkey."

She nodded thoughtfully. We were sitting at the breakfast table eating pancakes that I had cooked to look exactly like snakes, as chickadees shared their springtime songs just outside the open window. I had been debating all winter long whether to actually try this, telling myself again and again how silly it was. But at night the turkeys haunted me, sending me misty dreams of sprinting through the woods, reaching out my arms, and plucking turkeys out of the air.

My hesitation, I assured myself, was the only assurance of my sanity. There were important, real-world things to do, after all. Grants to write and entertainers to hire for the Renaissance faire we worked for. We had two horses we boarded at a friend's farm, and they needed training. There were repairs to make on

Chasing Turkeys

our house, gardens to plant . . .

“Do you really think this is a good use of our time?” Rebecca asked, giving voice to my concerns. “I mean, *chasing a turkey*? People already think we’re weird enough. We head up a belly dance troupe and work for a Renaissance faire.”

“Good point.” I was silent for a while as we ate. I arranged one of the pancakes on my plate. Oddly, no matter which way I turned it, I couldn’t make out the shape of a serpent. It looked more like a turtle that had been run over by a car.

“You’re thinking,” she said at last. “Think out loud.”

“I know it doesn’t make any sense, but I have this feeling that I’m *missing* something. Life is supposed to be meaningful, but what gives our lives meaning?”

“How does this relate to turkeys?”

“Maybe I just need to break my routine and discover what’s lying right out my back door. We’re always reading books and watching movies about people who live adventurous lives. They’re assassins or superheroes or explorers for National Geographic. I think the message I’m taking away from all those stories is that my life is a little dull.”

“And thus you will start running after wild birds. Is it even *possible* to catch one?” she asked.

“Humans can beat horses, so a turkey can’t be that much more difficult.”

“Humans can’t beat horses.”

“Sure they can,” I said proudly. “Every year, in a Welsh town, there’s a 22-mile race that pits humans against horses. In 2004 this

The Decision

guy named Huw Lobb won. Beat every horse out there, and others have done it since. Besides, we all have dreams, right? Maybe my particular dream borders on midlife crisis desperation, but . . .”

“I don’t know if ‘borders’ is the right word, Kenton. Besides, we have a lot of other things on the table right now. We have the new horse to train, at least three writing deadlines, a belly dance performance coming up . . .”

She was right, of course. Like just about everyone else we knew, we constantly spread ourselves too thin. Even things we enjoyed became tedious, because we were always carrying too much of a load.

“This will be different,” I explained. “It will just involve a little physical and mental training.”

She looked at me knowingly.

“Okay. It’ll take a *lot* of training. But . . .”

Then, all of a sudden, she set her hand on my arm.

“It’s crazy, Kenton. Silly, really. It’s probably impossible, and maybe it will totally screw up our life as we know it. But you know what? You’re right. Dreams *are* important. I had a dream of becoming a belly dancer once – that’s not exactly normal – and you helped me make it come true. So if you want to become a turkey-chaser, I’ll support you. Besides, if you can really do this, it will be pretty inspiring.”

“Inspiring?”

“Sure. A lot of people I know feel like their dreams are dumb. You’ll be setting a precedent. People can say, ‘Yeah, I’m spending my life savings on opening a pizza-flavored ice-cream stand in

Chasing Turkeys

Borneo, but at least I'm not as crazy as that guy who runs after turkeys.”

I sat in silence. I had been anticipating more of a debate. Not only had there been a total lack of an argument, but she had used the word “inspire.” Did she really think this could inspire people?

“This does not mean,” she added, “that you're not going to get some crap from me.”

“Sure,” I sputtered, still in disbelief that my idea had sold so easily. “Of course.”

“Good. Now, despite your dashing figure, you're out of shape. So if you're serious about this, finish your pancakes, get on some running clothes, and I'm going to bike along and be your personal trainer until you get this whole idea out of your head.”

My smile was so wide that she couldn't help but laugh. And so the adventure began.