

Cage Remodeling

Chumsy nuzzled into the palm of my hand, burying her face into the space between my thumb and forefinger. Her tiny body was practically vibrating with anxiety, letting me know she at least felt bad for what she had done. “Chumsy, you’re a bad, bad girl. You can’t vibrate your way into an apology this time,” I scolded. Disciplining a hamster can feel like an impossible task at times, and this was certainly one of those moments where I felt like I could just squeeze Chumsy until she popped. But I still loved her too much to stay on such a thought for too long. This hamster had saved my life on more than one occasion, forever making me feel permanently indebted to her- especially on this day which should’ve been mine and Dillon’s 5th anniversary. No matter how difficult Chumsy could be, she was still worth all of the time and energy I spent on her.

I placed her back in her destroyed cage and set a timer on my phone for an hour. “I’m sorry, Chum Chums, but I have to punish you. I HAVE to.” She squealed in desperation and pain like a broken chew toy. It was torture to listen to.

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Dillon had bought Chumsy off Craigslist as a gift for me after my OBGYN confirmed my infertility a year prior. I sobbed for a straight week after the news, refusing to even touch my new pet. “Vanessa, why don’t you get out of bed and come watch a funny movie with Chumsy and me in the living room?” Dillon would beg. He really thought this would work. But a hamster is too small an animal to fill such a void. Or so I thought.

When Dillon left me only a month after swearing he didn’t mind looking into adoption agencies, I cried my way through four boxes of tissues in under 2 hours before running out. I don’t know if it was my infertility or my reaction to it that drove him away, but I do know that I

had never been so overcome with emotion as I was that night. My mom still argues I was “having an episode” that night because I broke all the picture frames and burned his sweaters, but I believe that was a perfectly normal response to heartbreak. After I’d exerted all of my energy cursing Dillon’s name, I sat helplessly on my kitchen floor, tears and snot still dripping off my chin. Dark thoughts started creeping into my head. That’s when I heard Chumsy. She was crying with me.

I walked to the guest room of the apartment and removed her from her cage as she let out her high pitched squeaking sobs. Suddenly I didn’t feel as alone - holding her warm, furry body close to my face. I brought her close to my cheek as we cried together, using her fur to dry off my tears every once in a while. That was the exact moment I fell in love with my hamster. I noticed she had made a mess of her cage, but I had no more energy to be mad then. Besides how could I be mad at her when I myself had been a tornado in my own home. Instead I held her in front of my face and looked her in the eyes. We both went quiet as we empathized with one another’s distress. We really saw each other at that moment. I needed her and she needed me. We were just two sad, lonely girls sitting in our own mess, abandoned by the same boy we thought was supposed to love and take care of us. Both of us deserved better.

Feeling pretty hopeless about my own situation, I took a vow to at least improve Chumsy’s. Maybe I was in search of some form of control during a time in my life where I felt like I had none. I’m not sure why, but caring for Chumsy felt like the only thing I could bring myself to do. I could not make myself happy, but that does not mean she had to suffer with me. The following day after cleaning up the ashes and broken glass from my kitchen floor, I took a trip to the pet store and bought the biggest wire cage I could find. My mother would later accuse

me of being impulsive and delusional for spending nearly \$2500 on decorations for a 10'X3'X2' wire enclosure, but I didn't care. Retail therapy has proven benefits.

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Within that first month after Dillon left, I had learned a lot about taking care of my baby Syrian hamster. Online forums and vloggers gave great tips for building the perfect hamster mansion and I quickly got swept up in the excitement of it all. Per their advice, I got a second enclosure of similar size and dedicated the whole guest room to be the hamster room. I'd spend a week or two cleaning out one cage and redecorating it for Chumsy while she lived in the other. Then she'd switch. The online hamster owning community said I should only need to do this once a month, but Chumsy was a bit of a feisty hamster so 1-2 weeks was the maximum time I let her spend in one place.

She could never go very long without feeling the distress of being trapped in her tiny tank, and she let me know by digging up her wood chips and burying her water and food. She'd pee on the decorations I designed for her and chew up the others. She really could be a bitch sometimes. Some days she'd burrow in the back corner and give me the silent treatment. I knew to leave her alone on those days or else I might as well jam my fingers into a pencil sharpener. But I just wanted her to be happy.

I could not fit a bigger enclosure in the apartment, so I researched architecture and interior design methods to maximize her comfortability. I even tried adding themes to every cage to see if maybe she had an issue with the style. But to this very day I only know that Chumsy really doesn't like the following: old western towns, tropical islands, modern luxury mansions, circus tents, theme parks, frat houses, or art deco hotels. Nonetheless I had made my vow to make this hamster happy and I was determined to follow through.

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After 8 months and nearly \$7,000 later, I started to feel defeated. At this point I had tried everything I could think of. I started to feel grateful for my infertility because if I could not keep this goddamn hamster happy, how the hell would I raise a human baby. I felt like a horrible mother - like a complete failure even. Dillon was right to leave me, I thought. I pulled up his contact in my phone and stared at it. I still hadn't removed the heart from his contact name nor the shot of us kissing from his picture.

I hadn't thought about Dillon in a long time. He once was all I thought about. I had been so wrapped up in Chumsy's happiness I had nearly forgotten about him, and honestly it was kind of nice. To have a distraction from the heartbreak and infertility and all. It was exactly what I needed at that time. But with my inability to keep Chumsy happy after 8 months of cage remodeling and vet appointments and countless experiments to figure out why she fought me so much, I stood completely dumbfounded at my inability to create joy for anyone. I couldn't even create it for myself anymore. I looked down at his contact pulled up in front of me. I fought the urge to call.

My thumb quivered above the button as I thought it through. What would he think of me? What did he think of me already? *Did* he ever think of me? My heartbeat began to pick up as I felt the tears well up like quickly approaching storm clouds. Memories flooded and I started to sob, dropping to my knees in disappointment with myself. I saw it all flash before my eyes, but it was completely out of order. First were the images of us eating ice cream driving down the Pacific Coast Highway, then us blasting Rihanna in the shower together. The nights we talked about our future together and the nights we passed out naked on the couch. I sobbed for all I loved about us and for all I loved that we never got to become. And then memories of the

arguments crept back in. The nights I left him screaming in the kitchen while I drove to my mom's. The hours of silent treatment after a bad day at work. I took huge gasps of air between each tear that fell. I cried and cried and cried even harder for the time wasted on all of it. Four years down the drain. But at least I got a cute hamster. A cute hamster whose screams matched mine in the next room, likely while she was burying her food and peeing on it right under the half eaten cardboard stonehenge I handmade for her.

I exited out of Dillon's contact because I couldn't let him know how pathetic I was. So naturally I pulled up my mom's contact instead because mothers have to love you no matter how pathetic you are. My thumbs lagged as they pulled up her number with the urgency of a depressed sloth. The faint ringing made my headache worse as it loudened the misery in my brain. Then I heard it click.

"Hey darling, I was just thinking of you!" My mother said in a gentle tone. "I'm at the grocery store though, can I call you when I get back to the car?" I sat silently with snot bubbling at my parted lips. "Darling?"

"Mom- I, um- I feel kinda lost right now. And I don't know what to do. And I just feel so sad and so alone and... and I don't know what to do."

"Oh, baby, I hear so much hurt in your voice. What's wrong?" She offered her motherly support.

I struggled to respond in any articulate explanation for it all. "I just- I feel so- I tried to make Chumsy's cage into a Scottish castle theme, and I think she hates it, and- and I-" I could barely get through a sentence.

"Vanessa, I've told you that you can only remodel the cage so many times. A cage is a cage. You can't keep putting Chumsy's happiness above yours." The only response I could

muster was two quick snorts to suck up the snot and tears dripping down my face. “Is that all that’s on your mind, my darling? What else is going on?” My mother prodded.

“I can’t handle it anymore,” I spit out between sobs. “I’m miserable. I make everyone around me miserable.” At this point my heaves for air were slowing down. I couldn’t help but feel like I was the problem. Not just for myself but for everyone. “I don’t know why I’m so insufferable, but I can’t even stand myself. I try so hard. I try so hard to be good and I just can’t. I can’t, Mom. I fuck up everything for everyone always.”

“You’re putting a lot of pressure on yourself, Nessa, you can’t do that. You’ll go crazy. You can’t make everyone happy, you can only make *you* happy. And all this worrying about making others happy is only making yourself sad. It’s like you put yourself in a cage, and you don’t even know that you’re the one holding the key.” My mother often said cryptic bullshit like this. I always hated having a licensed therapist for a mother. But perhaps she was right this time—instead of focusing on making Chumsy happy and comfortable, I needed to teach this bratty rodent some discipline. So after 8 months of trying and failing to accomplish my goal, I switched directions.

“Thanks, Mom. You’re right.”

“I know, baby, I know. Listen, I’ll check in on you tonight, okay Nessa? I’m hunting for those corn chips your Dad loves and I cannot find them anywhere in this store. You just watch a movie or take a bath okay? Take care of yourself. You’ll be fine.”

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4 months later and Chumsy was no more disciplined than when she was a week old. She still screamed and cried and peed and tore through cage after cage. Perhaps this was because I often had difficulties sticking to the boundaries I set. I’d decide a punishment for bad behavior or

I'd tempt Chumsy with dried fruit treats for good behavior, and then at the first sign of disagreement between us I would cave and give her what she wanted. I've never been the type of person known for their strong will or firm sense of self, but I don't think I understood just how weak I truly was until I saw how Chumsy could chew straight through every one of my good intentions.

The would-be anniversary seemed to fuel a new drive in me however. It reminded me of what happened the last time I was unable to firmly assert my own wants and needs, but at least this time around my partner in crime couldn't leave me. Still, she did seem like she wanted to. The incessant squealing echoed in my head like a construction site at 8AM. It was tortue to listen to. I knew I had to find something to distract myself if I had any hope of maintaining my disciplinary response.

Casually I inserted my earbuds to drown out Chumsy's screeches with some calming music, but muting her didn't stop me from thinking about her. No symphony or etude could sway my attention away from Chumsy, and with my legs beginning to twitch I could tell this was going to be even harder than I thought. I checked my phone. "52 minutes left. Only 52 minutes." I said aloud to my empty bedroom. In 52 minutes I knew I would be able to move Chumsy into her new intergalactic space themed cage. How else could I distract myself for 52 minutes?

Instagram was an obvious mindless answer and I think that's what I was looking for. To be mindless for a while. My own mind would destroy itself otherwise, stacking feelings of guilt, shame, hopelessness, incompetency, and self doubt one on top of the other. I could already feel the winds of insecurity lightly nudging at the house of cards I called my sanity. I scrolled through my feed looking at picture after picture of happy hamster families from all the pet influencers I

followed, and each passing image felt like a stab to my soul. I considered giving up, but maintained some semblance of strength.

Then I was hit with the final blow: a post from Dillon. It was a picture of him and a blonde. She looked sweet. They looked happy. I've never wanted to die more in my life. I stared at the picture with a hateful glare as if I was making direct eye contact with my new nemesis. I scrolled lower to read the caption: "6 months with my girl<3 I couldn't be happier.." was as far as I read before I was prompted with the "read more" option. I couldn't read more. I couldn't. I wanted to call him so bad. I wanted to call him and yell every curse word I'd been saving since he left. Every bad thought I've ever had for him, for Chumsy, for my mother, for anyone had stayed hidden in the back of my throat like a hidden cancer, and I was finally ready to throw it all up. I felt my rib cage threatening to burrow into my esophagus and crawl out of my mouth. If my mother thought I was having an episode before, she really wasn't gonna like any action I felt compelled to take next.

With a voice so charged and finally free, I yelled "fuck you" as I threw my phone at the wall, leaving behind a tiny hole. A problem for later. "Fuck you!" I yelled as I grabbed my phone and slammed it on my hamster mansion crafting desk. "Fuck you! Fuck you! Fuck you!" I chanted as I smashed my phone over and over with the hammer from my tool box until the picture was no longer even recognizable. "Fuck you!" I screamed as I tried to flush my phone down the toilet. "God fucking damnit fucking FUCK- FUCKER! That FUCKER! FUCK YOU!" I screamed through sobs as I reached into the toilet bowl to pull out the phone that wouldn't flush. "FUUUUUUUUUUUUCK" I released every tension I've ever felt as I finally threw the phone out the window.

The bluetooth in my earbuds disconnected leaving me alone with the sounds of my own heaving mixed with Chumsy's in the room next door. My fingernails dug into the skin of my collarbone as I grabbed myself tightly desperate to get a grip on something at least. Why can't I be the one to make him happy? Why can't I make Chumsy happy? Why can't I make myself happy? I felt the walls closing in around me as my world collapsed into thousands of tiny little rodent sized pieces. I felt like I was in a cage and I couldn't get out.

I ran to the hamster room to grab the only living being who has ever understood. My hands chased her around her cage until they finally caught hold and brought her face to face with me. "Why do I keep remodeling the cage? Why do I do it, Chumsy?" I begged her for an answer. When I got none, not even a squeal or a screech or a cry to match mine, I got concerned. It was kind of unlike Chumsy to be so still in my hands. She was calm for once, for the first time since I'd had her. Something must've clicked at last. "You're being such a good girl, Chum Chums!" I encouraged her. "Thank you. For everything truly. For being such a good, calm girl, I'll reward you with your new enclosure! Welcome to space mountain, Chumsy!" I applauded in my baby voice.

I set her down and watched her frolic in the new bedding. She actually liked it, I thought to myself. I'd finally done it! Exhausted and directionless, I went to the other cage to start grabbing out the remains of the "little house on the prairie" themed decor. That's when I noticed the hole at the back corner of the enclosure. 'What? Chumsy, how did you-' my own thought was interrupted when I saw the hole in the wall she had dug out too. Chunks of pink fluffy drywall hanging out and scattered in the wood chips of her tank. "Chumsy, did you-" I asked as I turned around to see with perfect timing.

She was at her water bowl when it happened. She drank so fast she started to expand. My perfect little furball wasn't making any noise, she just kept drinking. I watched her start to round out until her feet couldn't touch the floor any more. She kept drinking. She must've been two, maybe three times her normal size. And she kept drinking. She kept drinking water until the drywall she had eaten began to burst through her skin. She started to make a fizzling noise and I watched her eyes close. Chumsy burst. Exploded. Drywall and hamster guts all over space mountain. I brought my hand to my mouth in disbelief and stared at the cage, which honestly looked more like the colosseum with all that blood. No sound escaped me in that moment. I don't think I cried until a few days later. All I could do at that moment was cover my mouth and begin to comprehend the words my mother said to me so many months before: "You can only remodel the cage so many times. It's still a cage."