

BOUNDLESS

CHAUNTÉ
LOWE

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1

THE EYES OF MY HEART

AS FAR AS I could tell, it was going to be another hot summer afternoon spent hanging upside down, feet perched against the back of our brown corduroy couch and my head dangling inches from the floor. Typically, as a child with untreated ADHD, I had enough energy to play for every hour that the sun danced across the blue sky. However, today was grocery day. Grocery day was the worst day of the week because our family didn't own a car, which meant we had to walk everywhere.

"Chaunté, put on your shoes," my mother called from the small, dimly lit kitchen. Unpleasant memories of our long, exhausting caravans immediately flooded my mind.

"Do I have to?" I pouted. I could practically taste the dry, hot air that only intensified with each car that whooshed past us as we trekked along the slightly raised concrete path, the pink soles of my shoes ripping away from their white, glittered bodies.

BOUNDLESS

My mother walked into my room, stooped down, and tied my tattered high-tops. Trying to make the best of this crummy situation, she said, “Well, how about this? I’ll get you some new shoes when I can, but for now, let’s pretend these old sneakers are new sandals.”

I marveled at her ability to artfully play my emotions like a fine-tuned instrument. She knew I loved to imagine, and she exploited this fact to get me peacefully out the door. Feeling empowered by my newfound ability to choose my perspective, I stopped to admire my new “sandals” and skipped happily outside.

My mother, my two older sisters, and I would walk the three and a half miles to the store, shop for about an hour, and then walk the three and a half miles back. From the oldest to the youngest, we were all expected to do our part and carry two bags of groceries on the trip back. These walks were painful. My little arms shook as I continuously repositioned my fingertips inside the handle loops of the plastic bags. Every few yards, the sweat of my palms would force me to set my bags down, dry my hands on my pants, and reset my grip. Powering through the pain with my head down, I read the paved trail beneath me, “Rock, crack, dried piece of gum.” We’d walked this path so many times that I’d memorized the scars of the sidewalk like the lines of my favorite Dr. Seuss book.

The whole adventure took several hours, and by the end of it, I was exhausted. Unenthused by the blistering California sun, I opted to spend the rest of my day inside, watching the spectacle of my sisters fighting over which TV channel we should watch. Being the youngest of three sisters, I offered no opinion and sat safely outside the lines of this battlefield. Leaving them to squabble, I let my mind wander and imagined what it would be like if I could travel beyond the borders of this sleepy town. Paso Robles, California, was nineteen point five square miles of mostly oak trees, vineyards, and farmland. With our feet being our only mode of transportation, I'd walked what seemed to be every square inch of it. Desperate to see more, I often badgered my relatives with questions about faraway places without ever getting a satisfying answer. Limited by finances and fear, no one in my family had ever been outside the state of California. These barriers were so crippling that we rarely ventured more than thirty miles away from our secluded hometown.

The fight between my sisters must have escalated rapidly, because my mother swooped in, settling the argument by choosing the channel herself. If I'd had a choice, I would have chosen the news. Channel 6 was my passport around the world, giving me glimpses into lands that I was sure I would never set foot on.

BOUNDLESS

When I watched our wooden-boxed television, it was like the glass screen that I gazed into held the power to open a vast world full of endless possibilities and wonder. Each show had its own ability to take my glazed eyeballs beyond the confinement of whatever four walls I was stuck inside, into a limitless oasis of hope and promise. It's incredible how many hours I spent watching my television until I found "It." "It" being the substance of what my curiosity was continually searching for. It's the thing that would eventually prove to be the element that anchored me to this earth. The one thing that jumped off the screen to spark something in my heart and firmly plant my feet on a path that took me toward my destiny. That moment came in the summer of 1988.

I was four years old, and I was watching the Olympics for the very first time. With a slim and pointy frame, I was lying on my stomach on the living room floor, my elbows planted deep in dark shag carpet, my chin resting in the palms of my hands as my feet swung up and down in utter delight.

For weeks I had heard everyone talking about the Games, but nothing could have prepared me for what was about to take place. The glowing light of our two-dial television jumped off the screen, and that's when I saw her. "FloJo," whose real name was Florence Griffith Joyner, emerged

from the depths of a long dark hallway, heroically taking her place on the South Korean coliseum track.

The warmth of Seoul's summer sun prompted sweat beads to gather just above her focused brows. Her piercing eyes glared down the steaming red track, laser-focused on the prize before her. Unbothered by the throngs of wildly cheering fans who flailed and bellowed behind her, Ms. Joyner took her place behind her starting blocks. Not realizing this moment was the calm before the storm, I took the opportunity to study her. Her hair was a lengthy mane, thick and wafting in the wind. Her nails, perfectly manicured, were long and painted patriotically to match her Team USA uniform. Everything about her screamed femininity, but her strength was undeniable. With the number 569 displayed on the bib pinned to her red top, the intensity in her posture let me know she was waiting for something to happen. Then, the starter, who stood on top of a short ladder off to the side of the track, raised a gun into the air. Gripping a mic with the other hand, he yelled, "Runners, to your mark."

The once thunderous crowd now hushed in anticipation and hung on his every word. Instinctively, the Olympian moved forward and placed her feet into the starting blocks.

"Get SET."

Her flawless nails digging into the track, the human bullet readied herself in the runner's position—

POW! The gun sounded.

FloJo shifted the weight through her hands, majestically converting that strength into power as her feet thrust hard against the stationary blocks. The resistance of this action forcefully jolted her body from the starting line, propelling her into the race of her life.

When the gun sounded, each of the eight runners seemed to be evenly matched across the expanse of the track. Open hands, high knees, and tipped toes pressed into the red-lined rubber. Each of their steps powerfully struck the ground repeatedly, accompanied perfectly by the look of determination in each woman's eyes. Without knowing the context of what was going on, one could still understand that the stakes were high. For some reason, my eyes kept returning to FloJo.

Graceful as a gazelle but with the strength of a roaring lion, she overtook each of her opponents one by one. Like a fiery dart, she crossed the line first, breaking the Olympic record with a time of 10.54 seconds over 100 meters. Ripping me out of that moment, a screeching yelp assaulted my ears from behind me. It was my mother.

Jumping up and down joyfully, she exclaimed, "I knew she could do it!"

Her excitement puzzled me. How did my mom know this woman? To my surprise, her sentiment echoed beyond

our walls. Through the open window of our living room, I could hear shouts of celebratory cheers coming from every open window and doorway of our apartment complex. That was the moment when I realized that what was happening was more significant than just a race around a track. The Olympics was a force that crossed geographic, cultural, and socioeconomic barriers, bringing people together all across the world.

I was hooked. With the Olympic torch of my heart now lit, I knew what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. I could no longer contain the inner excitement that erupted inside me. I blurted out at the top of my lungs, "I WANT TO BE AN OLYMPIAN!"

Thinking that there was no better time than the present, I began to run around our small two-bedroom apartment, crashing into the furniture, emulating my newfound "Shero." After several close calls with our delicate glass lamps, my mother told my older sister and me to go outside.

Seizing the opportunity to have my mom's full attention, I asked, "Mom, what would it take to become an Olympian? I want to be just like this FloJo woman."

My mother told me it would take hard work and perseverance. Unimpressed, partly because it sounded difficult and mostly because I didn't know what those words meant,

I scoured the room for a second opinion. My eyes locked on to the second-wisest person I knew: my older sister, who was six years old.

Desperate for a quick solution to the burning question, I repeated the question to my sister. "What would it take to become an Olympian?" I asked.

Pausing for a moment, with her arms crossed and her fingers rubbing her chin, my sister aimed her eyes up at the sky and responded, "You know what can make you run faster? Eating dirt."

Having nothing to lose and only being four years old at the time, I felt this advice was reasonable. Not wanting to waste a single moment, I exclaimed, "Let's go!"

We hurried down the wooden staircase to a very unusual place to play. The complex parking lot was the closest thing I had ever seen to a track, and to me, it was perfect. Cars lined the center of the lot inwardly facing one another. This design created an oval-shaped concrete loop that bumped up against the various apartment buildings. Separating the two lines of cars was a row of berry bushes planted in a patch of the "treasure" I was searching for.



Without hesitation, I filled my fingertips with the dry earthy dirt and dropped it into my mouth. Ignoring the taste and

without chewing, I swallowed it. I looked to my sister for approval, but instead, she laughed at me. “Haha! You fell for it,” she chuckled.

For the first time, I was unbothered by one of her pranks because, at that moment, I believed that it had worked. Immediately from within I felt faster, stronger, and more able to achieve this giant-size goal.

Picturing myself in a crowded stadium with wildly cheering fans, I took my place. I stood behind the white line painted on the black concrete positioned in an empty parking space and said, “Runners, to your marks.” I crouched down, one knee on the ground, and got into my imaginary blocks.

“Get set.” I pressed my dirt-tinged fingernails into the ground.

“GO!” I imagined the bang of the gun signaling me on toward victory. I ran around the parking lot as fast as I could. Feeling like I was flying, I ran faster than I had ever run before, with the wind hitting my face and the summer sun beating on my back.

From that moment, I knew my life would never be the same. I continued like this the entire summer. Every day, climbing down the stairs, lining up at my mark, and running as fast as I could around the concrete oval. When I lay

BOUNDLESS

in bed at night, I would recall the historic 100-meter race, where the most heroic woman I had ever seen placed her feet in the blocks and won the heart of the world. I didn't know when my time would come, but I knew that when it did, I would be ready.