

## **ENLIGHTENED**

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*Honorable Mention, Essay*

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**T**HE DOCTOR STANDING in the hallway outside the examining room lifts the file from the plastic holder on the back of the door and reads the notation. I hear his footsteps walk away toward the nurse's station, but his voice filters underneath the door as he queries, "Bambi? Is this woman for real?" I hear laughter.

I would laugh, too, if my body didn't know better. When the doctor returns and opens the door I manage a grimacing smile, "Yeah," I say, nodding gingerly, "I'm for real."

He has the grace to look embarrassed, then seeing my upper left arm, shocked, "What in the world happened?"

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My husband and I pitch the tent on the west end of the Mogollon Rim, 65 miles from Payson. The location is one of our favorites, far off the main highway on a winding dirt road—high on a small knoll, three sides dropping off to a tiny steep-sloped, lush green valley. It's a location that is isolated, peaceful, with no neighbors in sight or sound.

We spend the day exploring the area with our two blond haired, innocent-eyed sons. We build an Indian hut out of bark and branches. We play knights fighting mock battles, using long sticks to knock each other off balance on a fallen log. We splash in the water of a creek, chase butterflies, and feed squirrels with cracker crumbs. We hike to the edge of the rim to see the spectacular view—the rugged white limestone and sandstone cliffs dropping off hundreds of feet beneath us and flowing into endless miles of soft, cushy green hills butted up to distant blue mountains.

Now we're all tired, but it's still light out and too early to tuck into our sleeping bags. My husband offers to start a fire and make the kids hot chocolate. "Why don't you go spend some time by yourself?"

"Okay!" I agree enthusiastically. "I think I'll go look for deer."

Earlier in the day we'd seen evidence of their presence down in the tiny valley. Deer scat, and ferns the size of my forearm pressed flat where they'd bedded down. I know they will be returning for another night.

The evening air is chilly. I change from shorts to a pair of jeans and pull a thick long-sleeved sweatshirt over my t-shirt. As I lace up my hiking boots my husband sets a flashlight near my hand. "Here, take this with you."

"No. I don't need it," I say.

He insists, "When the sun goes down it gets dark fast."

I sigh. I'll take it to make him happy, but the flashlight is too big to fit in a pocket and I don't like carrying anything.

I leave the campsite, stepping carefully down the hillside on a steep and narrow path. It's muddy and slippery. Pebbles skitter out from under my boots, tumble down the slope. Off balance I grab a fistful of bush, steady my slipping feet. Shoot! With all this noise I'll scare away every deer within ten miles. Holding a flashlight in one hand doesn't help matters. I consider setting it down and going on without it. I can always pick it up on my way back. But I'm close to the bottom of the hill now and the muddy trail is leveling out. Though the sides are overgrown with bushes and seedling trees, and the path is tight with clumps of grass, the way becomes easier. I shift the flashlight to the other hand, pause to still my breath, to become as silent as possible to the wildlife I know is nearby.

I set my steps soft. I make my way down the trail, each movement precise and thought out. My eyes scan ahead, around the thick of trees and bushes, and up the sides of the slopes. I see slight movement. Stop. Two mule deer about 25 yards away! They poise, their large ears pointed, their dancer's legs quickening. When I take another step, the deer, with white rumps flashing, bolt in high stiff-legged jumps, all four feet hitting the ground together. Gorgeous.

The waning sunlight a shimmering polish on maple and aspen leaves, and ferns, squeezes out of the tiny valley. Long shadows are washing in, the darker color lengthening. Tall ponderosa pines lean close. The air is cool and moist, the smell of wet black earth rich and musty. My senses fill with glory.

Moving around a bush the size of a Jeep, I am suddenly at arms length from a reddish-tan, dark-eyed doe. We are so startled we simply stare at each other. A v-shape, its point centered between the eyes, rises to her black-tipped ears, gives her a delicate, elegant look. Her nostrils flicker, the white patch at her throat quivers, her unblinking eyes fix. Something about that look frightens me. She takes a step forward. I put out my hand to stop her. Instead she comes closer, sniffs the tips of my fingers.

"Hey!" I say, clipped and sharp.

The sound explodes her legs in a bound up the side of the slope. At about 20 feet she stops, turns and looks at me. I stand still. She stares long and intently, then puts her muzzle down and begins grazing. She's so pretty, a gentle creature.

My legs are tired. I think I'll just sit down on the ground and watch her awhile. I squat.

She's charging down the hill!

At me!

My brain struggles to form around what I'm seeing, what I'm hearing, what I know. I lean to the right. Head lowered, the deer butts into my left shoulder. I'm thrown backward in the mud, the air in my lungs deflating. I gasp for breath, flip myself over on the belly, forearms pushing up.

I've gotta get out of here!

Up on my knees, then my feet. Turning to look over my shoulder, I see my attacker charging again. She's standing tall on hind legs! I try to get away. But the raised front hooves, hard like hammer heads, catch me square between the shoulder blades. I crash to the ground. As I struggle to rise and run, she wheels around and again raises up on hind legs. This time the downward pounding hooves knock stars through the back of my head and with it some sense into my brain.

She's going to kill me.

Changing tactics, I curl tightly into myself like a turtle drawing in its legs. I fold my arms protectively around my head. Hooves like war clubs beat my shoulders. Blows on my hips, my back, my upper arms, on the hands clasped behind my head.

My face pressed into wet dirt, I hear each hit amplified loudly in my skull, the sound of my pulse roaring like a river. I know I'm close to blacking out. In holy terror, I realize I'm at the brink of death.

Oh God, please don't let my family find my body like this.

The clubbing stops. I don't move. For a moment there is silence. Then I hear puffs of air whiffle through her nostrils. She nudges my butt. Whuffs. Moist breath searches for the pulse at my neck. My heart beats like a wild thing. Breath panting loud, struggling to rein in the fear, the sound rises louder, louder. It's me! It's her! It's both of us.

She prods the back of my hand and thought ignites, "Flashlight." My finger finds the switch. The beam catches her by surprise. She leaps away. Instantly I'm on my knees, flashing the light. She moves up the hill, stands and looks at me. I drop the flashlight, grab fistfuls of rocks, sticks, and mud and throw them at her. The deer retreats.

I'm on my feet, eyes in a swirl, balance off. I must be hurt. I shout for help but the words my mouth forms have no sound. A fear on the edge of panic threatens. Night is coming on fast, I'm three-quarters of a mile from the campsite, and at any moment I could be ambushed again.

I stagger up the trail, concentrating on taking three steps forward, trying to call. Taking three steps forward, trying to call. When my throat finally releases the sound that comes through is high pitched, like some strange new bird.

It is dusk when I reach the trail heading up to the campsite. On top of the hill the fire's light flickers like a beacon. And there's my husband, strong and safe, coming down toward me.

He shouts, "Is that you making that noise?"

I form the words, cry out, "I've been attacked by a deer!"

He laughs, a deep guffaw. But as he gets closer his expression turns to horror. He grabs my hand, his firm grasp steadies me the rest of the climb.

Near the fire the boys stand close to each other, their forms mere shadows. I don't want them to see me like this but there's nowhere for them to go, and there's nowhere for me to hide.

Their young eyes lock on to me, I am covered with mud, jeans and sweatshirt ripped shreds. Their sweet faces recoil, "Mommy!" I reassure them, "I'm hurt, but I'm going to be okay."

My husband takes me into the tent and helps me undress. He speaks to me softly, touches my limbs with tenderness, tries to assess the damage. I feel the pain now; the back of my head throbbing, and I'm breathing against a chest of stabs. But we find no obvious broken bones and no blood. We decide medical attention can wait until morning.

The cloak of darkness settles low, we gather our sons into the tent. We are together, we can get through this. The boys fall asleep, wrapped in the security of bedtime prayers, blankies, and parental presence. My worried husband and I talk quietly but eventually he, too, dozes off.

It is more difficult for me. As each hour passes the ache in my muscles and bones intensifies. And when I close my eyes I see and hear the enemy. Every falling twig, every hooting owl, every shudder of tent fabric blasts through my senses. My eyes fly open. My heart gallops in terror. Security has been beaten out of me.

It is only when the pale moon rises, casting silver light across the billowed ceiling above me, the sleeping bag and my battered arms, that I find peace. At that moment it seems to me that light is the best of all gifts; moonlight, daylight, firelight. A little flashlight.

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Daybreak's honeyed light gilds the inside of the tent. I have been awake for a long time. I am so stiff and sore I can barely move. But my thoughts have been active, moving in and out of the attack. What I did right, what I did wrong. I meant no harm, but the doe didn't know. I was fighting for my life. But so was she. Today the danger for me is over, but for her the danger never ends.

My husband and sons stir, open their eyes. They sit up, look at me. In the brightness we discover that my body has bloomed a reddish purple. From head to thighs I am covered with bruises and abrasions. The injuries might have been caused by any number of things, except for the testimony of one mark—on my upper left arm the perfect shape of a deer hoof is branded into the skin like a tattoo.

