

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/3

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RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Alyson and I stood outside the Yosemite Park Visitor Center where we waited for Mike and Dylan. I shifted my backpack, heavy with food and gear. The park was full of students like us on summer break, and I noticed some of them staring at Alyson's backpack.

Alyson's cat, Frisco, peaked out of her backpack snapping his head side-to-side, watching everything while Sugar, my puppy, slept in my arms.

"Cats don't belong on a backpacking trip," I said.

"You're bringing your dog. What's the difference?"

"We always brought our family dog on camping trips when I was a kid. Never brought our cat though. They can't be controlled."

Mike and Dylan exited the Center with information about the bears we were sure to encounter.

"We're to gather our food into a pouch, rope it between two trees high enough so the bears can't reach it standing up," Mike said. "Oh, and this pamphlet says no domestic animals are permitted in Little Yosemite Valley." He glanced at Sugar then Frisco.

I shrugged. "I'm not going without her."

A half-hour into the hike, shouts came from behind.

"Frisco! Frisco!" Alyson's screams echoed through the forest.

Mike slipped out of his pack, propped it against a tree. "Wait here. I'll go back, see what's going on."

I slid my backpack off and walked Sugar along the creek flowing next to the trail. Sometime later, Mike came into view from around a switchback.

"What happened?"

"Frisco jumped out and ran up a tree. A ranger brought a ladder and enticed him down with some tuna. They're taking him back to the valley. We'll make camp and wait for them in Little Yosemite."

Knowing Frisco was safe, I swallowed back a bit of laughter, reached down and pet Sugar.

"What're they going to do if the kennel doesn't have room for Frisco?" I said.

"I don't know. They should have thought of that before they decided to bring their cat along."



The constant roar of Vernal Waterfall grew louder as we rounded another switchback and came face-to-face with the massive wall of water that thundered down the mountainside. The drumming reverberated through my chest drowning out everything else. I loosened my ponytail,

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tilted my head back, closed my eyes, and let the overspray wet my tongue and face. The mist tasted cool and clean like the mountains themselves.

Further on, the trail changed from a pine needle dirt trail to granite steps which ascended alongside the fall. Sugar managed to stay close beside me, leaping from step-to-step. Her pink tongue hung out of her open mouth making her appear to wear a smile. She won my heart yet again with her small size but big determination. I glanced behind at Mike. He carried an even heavier backpack than mine, but he too showed a perpetual smile. I pointed to Sugar. Mike pushed his long hair back from his face to watch our puppy struggle to pull herself up the high stone step, like doing a chin-up. He lifted her into his arms.

By the end of the day, exhausted, we set up camp next to a wide stream in Little Yosemite Valley where we waited for Dylan and Alyson. Two hours later, they dragged themselves into camp, detailed for us their ordeal with Frisco, including the ranger's lecture about bringing a cat.

Mike and I planned to sleep under the stars, but we set up our pup tent as backup against rain. After dinner, we relaxed, leaned back on logs arranged around the campfire. I cuddled Sugar next to me and dozed off.

A loud crack from the woods startled us awake. Rustling sounds. Branches breaking.

We all jumped up. I grabbed Sugar, listened to what sounded like a giant crashing through the trees toward us. The noise stopped. Empty silence filled the space.

Goosebumps ran up my legs to the top of my head. Sugar trembled in my arms. Her big round eyes stared into the forest in the direction of the sound.

I strained to listen but heard nothing more. Then the commotion started again, not as loud, like something trying to sneak up on us. My heart slammed against my ribcage.

"Look!" I pointed.

About thirty feet away, a bear poked its huge head from the underbrush, scanned our campsite, then pulled and strained its enormous body through the thicket. The forest released its grip, and the bear popped into the clearing, shook off leaves and sticks.

"Oh, my God," I whispered.

Two bouncing, jubilant cubs tumbled out behind the mother bear.

Sugar whined, struggled to climb out of my arms. I held her tight, afraid she'd run off in the woods and get mauled by wild animals.

The three others grabbed pots and pans, banged them together as instructed by the visitor center. We all yelled, stomped, made lots of noise, but nothing scared the bears away.

In well-choreographed unison, the cubs left their mother's side, and like mischievous youngsters, circled our camp and headed straight for the trees that held our food.

We shouted louder, jumped higher, banged pans harder, all to no avail.

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The cubs stayed on their mission. I spoke to Sugar, still in my arms, tried to make her feel protected, but I wasn't sure if any of us were actually safe.

The cubs climbed the tree in sync, stretched their short arms and paws to within inches of our food bag. When they couldn't grab the sack, they swung the rope back and forth like a jump rope, higher and higher, as though trying to break it. They appeared confident, full of purpose.

The mother bear waited for her cubs at the base of the tree. Dylan threw a clump of dirt and hit her in the rump. The bear turned her gigantic head towards us, assessed our little group. We stood frozen, held our collective breath, waited for her reaction.

On her invisible signal, the baby bears shimmied backwards down the tree, scampered away behind their lumbering mama.

I released my breath, and we talked all at once.

"Oh, my God – "

"Did you see – "

Mike put his arm around me and Sugar. "You okay?"

"My heart's pounding. At least we won the right to be here – I think."

An hour later, even with no sign of the bears coming back, we decided to sleep in the tent just in case. Sugar curled up between us, and soon Mike's breathing came deep, steady. I lay awake a long time listening to the forest.



We broke camp at daybreak. I threw bits of leftover bread high in the air and watched a dozen blue jays sweep to catch the crumbs mid-flight.

All the animals seemed tame in Yosemite. Even the chipmunks ate peanuts right out of my palm.

We'd hiked for hours when we crossed paths with a group of four rangers trekking the opposite way down the mountain.

"Hey, folks, didn't you see the posted notice? No domestic animals permitted up here," the pudgy lead ranger said. "Take the dog back to the valley kennel."

"What? We can't leave her in a kennel. She's too young." My voice cracked. Heat rushed to my face.

Mike stared at the ranger. "What's the problem?"

"Park rules."

"So you're telling us we have to hike all the way back to the valley floor because of your rules?"

"Yep."

"What's the purpose of a rule like that anyway?" I said.

"The scent from domestic animals disrupts the migration pattern of the wildlife," the ranger said.

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Mike faced the group of rangers. "It'll take several hours – "

"Leave your equipment here with your friends. Going down'll be faster," said a young, thin ranger with a pock-marked face.

"How long to the bottom?"

"Without gear, a couple hours down, maybe four to get back. Take a flashlight."

"I'll go alone, make better time. You stay with Dylan and Alyson," Mike said.

"No, I want to go too." I wiped away a snuffle. I needed to see our puppy safe.

"We'll come back for your packs after we set up camp," Dylan said.

The young ranger showed us where to hide our gear.

"What about the bears? Do they hunt during the day?"

The lead ranger shrugged. "Not usually, but—"

Mike carried Sugar, and we started down the mountain. The rangers followed some distance behind. My frustration grew with every step.

"We've got to do something," I whispered.

"Like what? You want me to get arrested for disorderly conduct, or worse?"

"No, but—"

"Then quit arguing. Let's get this over with."

I shook my head to clear my thoughts, but my anger intensified. I fought a desperate urge to snatch Sugar and run, then a new idea popped in my head.

"We can't leave her for ten days."

"Get over it. We don't have a choice." Mike sounded annoyed, wiped his face on his t-shirt sleeve.

"Let's ditch 'em, get ahead and hide." I stared into his clear blue eyes. It felt like begging, but I didn't care. I wanted to save Sugar from abandonment.

Mike, just home from Vietnam and resentful for being sent there in the first place, was a rebel against the establishment. He was already miffed for being ordered around by these guys, so it didn't take much to convince him my plan would work.

He glanced behind at the rangers and a new fire lit his eyes. We hiked faster around the switchback, putting distance between the rangers and us. With them out of sight, we broke into a run. I looked back, saw the lead ranger charge after us. His radio, small shovel, and ropes bounced against him, and his round freckled face pulsed red. Even with all his equipment, and an extra ten pounds of body weight, he still moved fast.

We bolted down the mountain. When we reached our familiar campsite from the previous night, we broke away from the trail and slid to a

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stop behind a huge tree. The lead ranger tore around the corner. I listened, hoped he'd run past us. But he slowed to a walk, footsteps crunched on pine needles, coming closer. Then he stopped. I sucked in a muffled breath. Sugar buried her face in Mike's chest. Moments passed and even the birds fell silent. The ranger peeked around the tree. I yelped and jumped back.

"You think this is a game?" His voice boomed. Birds fluttered from the canopied trees. "I see you two aren't going to cooperate."

"Yeah, we will," Mike said with a tone of resignation. He handed Sugar to me, uncapped his canteen and took a long swig. "Give us a minute."

I coughed to cover my frustration at our failed escape and held Sugar with my back to the ranger in defiance. For the rest of the hike, the four rangers stayed close, keeping us within their sight.

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We checked Sugar into the kennel. I lifted her with both hands, nuzzled into her furry neck, and begged her forgiveness.

"Give her to the lady."

"I can't. She's in a strange place and doesn't know we're coming back."

"She'll be fine. Let go." He pulled Sugar from my arms and handed her to the woman behind the counter. "She'll be waiting when we get back." He ruffled my bangs to lighten the moment.

"Yeah, I know, but this sucks."

We started our long hike back up the mountain. Hours later, exhausted and hungry, we dragged ourselves through the dark into camp.

I barely recognized our backpacks. Shreds of red nylon fabric dangled from the aluminum frames.

"Oh, no. What happened?" I said.

"We went back for your packs and caught a bear eating your food in broad daylight. We tried to chase him away, but he ignored us," Dylan said.

"He ate everything?" I examined the strings of nylon. "Even our soap and toothpaste?"

"Sorry, guys. We brought enough food to share, but we'll have to cut our trip short."

We backpacked Yosemite the following year and several more times after that. We learned something new every time, but on that first trip, we learned the most important lessons of all: follow park rules and respect mother nature.