

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/4

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Nell

EVERY YEAR SOMEONE IS KILLED" My husband read the park service sign aloud. On it was a sketch of a man tumbling down a waterfall. Having seen it before, I shifted my eyes back to the real thing: Yosemite Falls unloading—crashing into a rocky pit, dissolving into foam, swirling off into the dark green Merced, and everyone trying to get a picture of it. Then, I spotted two small figures, children on all fours, climbing the wet rocks alongside the pit. Shaking my head, I glanced over at my husband, thinking how easily people die, and said, "Remember what happened to me, in the hills, with the cow?"

My husband slipped his arm around my waist and said, "I remember everything you tell me." Guiding me around the clots of people, to the small, wooden bridge, he narrowed his eyes into two slits and whispered in my ear, "Now my dearie, I have you all to myself."

"Dearie," I said, peeking over my shoulder, taking one last look at the falls, "you always have me all to yourself. But what about my cow?"

He straightened up. "Okay. Which one?"

"The one that charged me, with the calf, all curled up on the grassy slope."

As we stepped off the bridge and onto the trail, my husband said, "You got too close, but I wouldn't call that charging. Who ever heard of a cow charging?" He took off his hat, a suede, cowboy-style thing he'd bought on the way up. "All I remember was her galloping toward her calf and that look on your face, when you thought she was heading for you." He let out a chuckle, then put his hat back on.

Catching the side of his face, the salt and pepper stubble dotting his ruddy cheek, I said, "You'd better shave that thing when we get back to the lodge. You're starting to look shifty, like that cartoon character—what's his name—that kidnaps women and ties them to railroad tracks."

"Snidely Whiplash, but there's only one woman, Nell, and she always gets saved."

As I conjured up the villain, the slit of his mouth, the spindly black mustache, my husband stopped short and pointed his finger down the trail like the snout of a gun. "Look," he said.

A large, rectangular black and yellow metal sign was mounted on a stake between two boulders. *A Mountain Lion Has Been Sighted In This Area.* Beneath the warning, a lion was pictured. Perched on a tree limb, it lurked above two unsuspecting hikers. I peered down the trail. Flat and wide, framed by thick forest on the left and a line of trees fronting a short steep slope on the right, the trail was just as I remembered it. A quick scramble down to the right and we'd be back to the road within a few minutes, but farther ahead, I knew, the trail snaked inward, deeper into the forest.

Standing in front of the sign now, I took in the shape of the animal—its wide paws, triangular face, muscular flank, and long, thick tail. "Now what?" I said.

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/4

He glanced at me, then back at the sign. "Carry a big stick, and don't crouch down."

I snatched a twig off the ground. "Like this?"

He looked at the twig, then at me, as if he'd forgotten who I was and then remembered. "Sure, if you're planning to fend off a chipmunk."

I peered up at the tree above me, at the sprawl of branches, at the trunk shooting skyward. "Maybe we should have huffed and puffed up Vernal instead." Vernal was a set of falls, a tourist-strewn trail, up a steep staircase cut from cliff.

My husband, speaking to the sign, said, "There's two of us and one of him, and what's the likelihood of seeing a lion on a sunny Saturday in summer? Plus we always do Vernal our second day in the park."

Nodding, I took my husband's hand, let him take me down the trail, knowing he was right—lions were reclusive—and wrong, because in the past we'd stumbled into grizzly feeding on berries, had been forced off a trail by a snorting bull, and chased down another by a cloud of bees. *Lucky to be alive* I could have said aloud, but instead I let go of my husband's hand, slipped a few steps behind, and tried to focus on what was before me, the trees and the massive chunks of granite between them, but my eyes kept reverting back to the ground, to the prints in the dirt—animal or human.

My husband stopped and waited for me to catch up. "What?"

"Nothing," I said.

Eyeing me, he unscrewed the top of the water bottle. Dropping his head back, he drank.

Standing there, I watched his adam's apple slide up and down, knowing he was thinking that nothing is always something.

"Here," he said, handing me the bottle.

I shook my head.

"You're not going to do another Grand Canyon, are you?"

He was referring to the time I'd gotten stuck at the bottom, couldn't move my legs, because, according to him, I'd ignored the signs, hadn't drunk enough water. Changing the subject, I said, "Horses, I can smell them. We're near the Village, aren't we?"

"Why—you want to cut down, get something to eat?" He screwed the cap back on, rested the bottle against a rock, then peered down the trail.

"Do you?" Looking for a sign, I moved my eyes from his face to his hands, but even his hands, nails bitten down to the cuticles, were at ease for a change, dangling at his sides. I started walking again, even though getting off trail was exactly what I wanted. But I'd already forced my husband back once before, last summer, on a trail, a beauty in British Columbia, in Banff, that started off well enough along an old set of railroad ties blooming with wildflowers, then narrowed into a single lane, slicing through hip-high willows, down slope toward a lake. What had spooked me was a woman coming from the opposite direction. Passing us, she'd

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/4

turned away, but I still caught a glimpse of her face—bitter and unhappy. And there'd been a warning at the trailhead, just a few sentences from the park service about a sow and her cubs being spotted on the trail. It was low key, no sketch of a menacing grizzly as there had been in Montana in Glacier National Park, where we'd been the week before. There I'd tied bells to my shoes laces and been made fun of, called "Dinner Bells."

Now, though, there was no woman, no one at all on the trail but us, and the endpoint this time wasn't a lake six miles into the Canadian wilderness but the Ahwahnee, a swanky granite and timber hotel named after Indians that had gathered food in the Valley by day and left at dusk, afraid of spirits that dwelled among the dark cliffs.

As we continued walking, the trail curved back out, and I saw the familiar gray barn off to the right—Yosemite Stables—and beside it horses milling in a pen, and I thought maybe we shouldn't have aborted that trail in British Columbia, shouldn't have spent a good week before that trip reading accounts of attacks—campers dragged from their tents in the fog of the night. Lie on your stomach, hands gripping the back of the neck, backpack covering the kidneys. And all the attack stats. I was good at that, scaring myself, my husband had said.

I glanced at my husband now, his arms swinging at his sides, water bottle dangling from his hand. "We're halfway there, aren't we?" I said, but he didn't seem to hear me. Absorbed, I assumed, in his "Yosemite mind," as he liked to call it, he just kept walking while I, beside him, spotted something odd ahead, a circle of shade in the middle of the trail. Slowing down, I looked from the circle to my husband's back, to the horses again, still milling, unperturbed, then back to the circle, where I saw the shape of something now, an outline of an animal, a tall, skinny dog, sitting on its haunches. And my husband, apparently unaware of it, was heading right toward it. Another thirty feet and that would be it. Still, I lagged behind. In the past I'd mistaken tree trunks for bears and branches for rattlers. I shut my eyes and then opened them again, but nothing had changed, and I knew, just as I'd known when I looked into the woman's face, that trouble was ahead. Scooting up behind my husband, I touched his shoulder and whispered, "Lion." His head jerked up, and he froze. The animal was sitting stone still at the center of the trail, fixed on the horses, and we, fixed on the lion, watched it, watched until it slowly sank down to its belly and crawled across the trail, into the sunlight, closer to the horses. Its triangular ears, tipped with tufts of hair, were erect, and its tawny coat was spotted.

"There's a cutoff right over there, a few feet ahead. Follow me," he said softly, starting to move slowly forward, keeping his eye on the lion.

I followed, listening to my own footfall, each scrape of pebble, each snap of twig. Veering gradually to the right, we headed toward the edge of the trail. Though the sign had said to face the lion if confronted, I couldn't help but look back over my shoulder, at the trail from which we'd come. To run back down it, back to where it started, the bridge at the base of Yosemite Falls where people were snapping pictures and the great engines of the tour buses were softly rumbling in the parking lot was what I wanted to do, but I felt my husband's hand on my shoulder. "You first," he said.

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/4

I peered over the edge, to a short, steep, gravel path, and shook my head. "Down this backward?" One stumble and I knew the lion would be on us.

My husband pointed. "You forward." Then he turned around and pressed his back against mine. "We'll hold each other up."

Squatting low, I inched down, keeping knees bent, my hips to the ground, halfway down now, I realized my husband wasn't against me. I couldn't feel him at all, and I stopped and looked over my shoulder, up at my husband still perched at the top of the slope, at the edge of the trail, just standing there. Annoyed, I hissed, "What are you doing?"

He twisted back to glance at me, then turned forward again and slid one foot back, then the other, as looking every so often over his shoulder at the ground, then forward again, like a tightrope walker. When he reached me, we moved down the rest of the slope together, back to back, his body against mine, until his weight was too much and my foot slipped, and I skidded, fell to my knee, and slid the rest of the way down.

At the bottom, my husband pulled me up. "You're bleeding," he said.

I looked down at my knee, at the long red scrapes, the bits of gravel stuck to them, and got up. "Where is it?" I looked up the slope.

"Come on." He took my hand.

"We better find a ranger," I said.

My husband, pulling me past the stable, said, "What for?"

"We're so close to the Village, all these houses." I looked off to the right, toward the stone chimneys and steep, triangular roofs of the park personnel houses. Behind one were four little children all crouched in a circle, poking at something with a stick. "What if. . ." I started to say, but my husband, staring straight ahead, said, "They'll see the sign. It can't get any bigger."

"A sign and a sighting are two different things." I let go of his hand. "Besides, people don't read signs"

"We do, don't we?"

"We," I said, taking the water bottle from him, "aren't people." I poured water onto my palm, then splashed it on my knee. It was turning pink and puffy and starting to burn. Handing him the bottle, I said, "I still think we should report it. Those children. Don't you care?"

"Then you'd better hurry. There's one of your rangers right now, heading for his car."

"Hey!" I shouted, half-running, half-limping. "Lion! Up there!"

The ranger, a heavy-set man wearing a beige Yosemite uniform, looked up at me. "You don't say."

"We got off trail," I said, "gave it lots of space."

The ranger nodded. "That's probably a good idea." Reaching into his car, he pulled out a pair of sunglasses. "That one's a youngster, a male, been seen a couple times before. You're lucky, though." He nodded again.

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/4

"Getting a look at him. I've worked the park twelve years and never seen one."

"Well he's probably still up there right now." I glanced back at my husband, who was milling behind me, then back to the ranger, who had gotten into the car and was watching me as if I were the lion. Walking back over to my husband, I said, "I don't think he believed me."

He shrugged. "Forget it. These days rangers spend more time policing people than animals." He started walking toward the Village, and I followed.

In front of the Ansel Adams Gallery, I sat down on a bench while my husband hunted for something to eat. People, smiling and happy, were making their way from the ranger station to the food concessions-pizza and deli-where old bikes with clover-shaped seats and pedal brakes were parked in metal stalls. In front of the post office, a stone cottage, a gray-haired man with a blue backpack slipped a postcard in the mailbox. Nearby, a dog, tied to a post, kept barking. A little girl walking with her family tried to pet it, but the dog lunged at her.

"Here," my husband said, handing me a piece of pizza. "You'll feel better."

"Better?" I said. "We could have been killed."

Chuckling, my husband popped open a soda and put it between us. "Look, if the lion wanted to kill you, he would have come up behind you and you wouldn't have known the difference. You wouldn't have heard a thing, and then it would be over."

"What makes you such an expert at lions?" I asked, annoyed all over again.

"I didn't say I was an expert at anything. I just know a few things."

"You don't know what that lion would have done if you'd dawdled there longer." I took a sip of soda and put the can back down. "Just like that guy who kept getting closer and closer to the snake."

"Snake? I thought we were talking about lions." He took a bite of pizza, then picked up the can of soda.

"Last summer, the rattler out at Big Sur all coiled up blocking the trail. The guy's wife was half hysterical, screaming at her husband to back off. Remember?"

"I remember the woman. I don't remember him getting bit, though."

"That's because we didn't wait around. The woman was getting on your nerves. You walked right past the snake."

"And we lived, right?"

"We got lucky," I said.

"Maybe the snake liked us."

"Sure." I laughed. "Snakes love you."

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/4

"I mean the ranger in the parking lot said there were snakes all over the place, and there were warning signs."

"That's true." I looked over at all the buildings, behind them the forest and the road where the ranger had been parked. "But I don't get why the ranger here didn't hightail it up to the trail. He'd said he'd never seen a lion before."

"Maybe he didn't want to seem anxious. Maybe he was scared. Like I said rangers spend more time giving speeding tickets than wrangling with lions."

"But what about those children?"

"It was the horses it was after, and the horses didn't even care. We could have walked right by and kept on the trail."

"Right," I said, rolling my eyes.

My husband stood up and dropped the remains of our lunch in a garbage can. Let's head over to Vernal, join the masses."

"I think we're already among them," I said, rising. Walking back, we passed the post office, a lovely stone building with large sashed windows, where the dog was. It was still tied up, but wagging its tail now as its owner was kneeling down, untying its leash.



Wilderness House Literary Review 16/4





Wilderness House Literary Review 16/4



