

The Oval

Volume 10
Issue 2 *Staff Issue*

Article 38

4-30-2017

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Recommended Citation

Throop, Destini (2017) "What Happens in Pinescreek," *The Oval*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 2 , Article 38.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/oval/vol10/iss2/38>

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What Happens in Pinescreek

by Destini Throop

I hear a sigh from the next cubicle over. Nick must be looking at the time, knowing it is only noon on a Tuesday. I look at my desk, despising the layout of my cubicle. As if moving the desk into the corner would make it any more bearable. Working at *People* isn't all bad. I get the latest updates on celebrities and my job entails entering data into a computer system for eight hours straight. I even got to meet Emma Watson, easily one of the best days on this job. I live in a medium sized town that no one knows exists. Pinescreek has a special feel to it.

When I moved here, I had no idea that it was big enough to have a branch of *People*, but this town is full of surprises. I love that Pinescreek doesn't have any chain restaurants. It's all local businesses that were started by townsfolk generations ago. If a chain restaurant tries to come to Pinescreek, protests go up and the idea gets shut down. It's a cozy feeling knowing everything is brought to you by local friends. Tricia, my best friend since first grade, thinks I have my life figured out. Boy is she wrong.

Nick interrupts my train of thought as he rounds the corner into my cubicle. "Wanna go to lunch? I'm absolutely starving."

"I thought you would never ask. Let me get my purse."

"How is your significant other?" Nick asks with a smirk.

"He told you, didn't he?"

"I have no idea what you are talking about."

"Nick, come on, just tell me! He's told everyone except me."

"I won't give it away, Jessie."

I end my whining with a "humph" letting him know I am irritated.

"Oh, let it go, Jessie. He is surprising you, let it happen. Besides, Tricia already wants to kill me for hinting at something the other day."

I keep hoping to get more out of Nick during lunch, but he is stubborn about keeping his word. Leif, my boyfriend of five years, and Nick are best buds, and are both in on a surprise Leif is planning for my 25th birthday. Even Tricia knows, which she has no problem parading around. Although Nick is infuriating, I am thankful for his friendship. He got me the job at *People*, and has never failed to help us out. We head back to work and I finish my episode of *Once Upon A Time*. My last data entry is put in when the clock strikes five, and my misery is over for today.

I pick up my phone and see three missed calls from Tricia. She probably got a date with that hot Italian she has been flirting with for weeks.

"You never pick up. I just had the best day, and you weren't even around to hear me gush about it. Seriously, girl, get your priorities straight."

"Sorry, Trish, I got caught in the numbers. Do tell. I want to hear all about this hot Italian guy."

"Oh, Jess, that guy is so last week. I bumped into Nick this morning and we are going for coffee tomorrow!"

"Nick? Really? He is so not your type, Trish. Nerdy with a comb-over?"

"Okay, he isn't a hot Italian guy, but he is so adorable. I just can't seem to get enough of him. Speaking of, Leif wanted me to take you out tonight so he can plan your thingy. Is eight okay?"

"Yeah, I'll see you then. You better buy me some booze."

I hang up the phone and head home. I know Tricia thinks I have it all figured out, but part of me is jealous of the adventures she gets to have. I love Leif and my job is in the field I want to be in, but all I do is work. I hear her talking about different suitors bringing her to Italy and New Zealand and wonder if I will ever travel the way she does.

The night goes by quickly as Trish takes me to different clubs. We dance the night away and drink so much I wonder how I will work tomorrow. Each shot makes me lose track of those thoughts, until I'm home and Leif is

bringing me to bed.

“We need to have more adventures,” I slur to Leif as I try to get my pajamas on.

“I agree. But for right now you need to get to bed. We can talk more about adventures tomorrow.”

“I loooove you. I can’t wait to be your wifey.”

“I love you too. You are my adventure.”

I close my eyes and fall into the deep world of drunken dreams. A world filled with romantic nights in Paris and relaxing mornings in coffee shops. A world with adventures.

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“I don’t remember any of last night. I think I got pretty wasted. I’m sorry,” I say as I wake up with a groan.

“You are cute when you’re all shitty” he said with a chuckle.

“I’m glad you get enjoyment out of my drunkenness,” I give him a playful push as I finish getting ready for work.

“Leif?”

“Yes?”

“I want to go to Paris. I want adventures. Mystical and romantic walks through the city, something totally different than here.”

“Well, if we incorporate some time in the mountains in there, I would love that. But we both have work and responsibilities here.”

“I hate responsibilities. We have enough money, let’s just go.”

“It’s not about money. It’s about being adults. Believe me, I would love to go hunting, camping, backpacking, and be anywhere but here, but work is too busy right now.”

“Then let’s go camping, or hiking. Something that won’t take us away for long, but will give us the satisfaction we crave.”

“I can’t. You’re going to be late for work.”

“Well, maybe I will be going without you. I need to do something other than work, and if you can’t do that, maybe I will go with Trish.” I head out the door, slamming it behind me.

The day drags on and I take more Advil. My headache gets worse with each minute that passes.

“Crazy night?” Nick asks with a smirk.

“Ugh, Trish has a way of doing that.”

“Oh, believe me, I know. We went out last week.”

“I hear you two had a little something,”

His face turns tomato red. “Yeah, I would say we did.”

I chuckle, “Good luck, she’s a wild one. When we turned 21 together, I was hungover for two weeks straight. Although, I kind of miss that spontaneity.” I glance at my computer. “Oh! It’s finally time to go home. I thought this day would never end.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Jessie,” Nick says as he walks out of the office.

I walk out, knowing I won’t be doing anything except for cleaning and paying the endless amount of bills. I open the door to my apartment, cringing as the creaking is worse than ever. I put the keys on the table and see bags everywhere. As I round the corner into our bedroom, the closet doors are open and clothes are everywhere. It looks as if a tornado hit the apartment. I can’t even see the blue comforter on our bed underneath the mountain of clothes and supplies. Our brown carpet has bottles of shampoo, conditioner, hair products, lotions, and body wash in bags. I halt before the bathroom, seeing everything has been pulled out of the cabinets.

“Leif? Where are you? What is happening?”

“I’m in here.”

I leave the bathroom, go back through the adjoining bedroom and into the living room. Leif is standing there with the most ridiculous outfit on. He has on khaki shorts that are too small, a camo jacket that is way too big, a matching cap, and hiking boots. He is holding the most beautiful bouquet of flowers, and my heart swells.

“What are you wearing?” I say, trying to suppress the laughter wanting to escape.

“Well, you wanted an adventure, so I am taking you on one. But I couldn’t find the right clothes. So, this is what happened.” He hands me the flowers. “I’m sorry for being a dick.”

“What kind of adventure will this be?” I ask while smelling the flowers.

“I was thinking camping, but obviously it’s been a while since we have gone into the mountains. I can’t believe I have let myself become a city boy.”

“Well, let’s find the right clothes for you, then we will go camping,” I say between laughs.

“Oh thank God, I can’t wear this another second,” he laughs as he starts taking off the ridiculous outfit.

“So, where are we going?”

“I was thinking we could go to your grandpa’s place.”

“Gold Creek? That’s a good idea. I want to stop and visit my grandpa on the way.”

“That was already in the plan. By the way, this isn’t the surprise I originally had planned for you, but it kind of became obvious to me that it’s what you wanted, so...surprise!”

“Ah okay, well what did you originally have planned?”

“That is a surprise for another time.”

I give him a playful punch and get back to packing.

We finish packing that night and by early Thursday morning, we are on the road, headed to a place about an hour away from Pinescreek. We both called out sick until Tuesday, giving us a long weekend. The mountains surround the town, but Leif and I never get a chance to get out and enjoy them. We used to go camping, hiking, and even hunting, but Leif lost his job in the timber industry and had to switch to engineering. We have been too busy ever since to continue going into the mountains.

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My grandpa’s house hasn’t changed a bit. We get out and I inhale the all too familiar scent of smoke from the wood stove and grandma’s fresh potato bacon soup. We happened to go on a day my whole family is there, and spend some time catching up. My grandpa Bud and Uncle Roger are big men, edging on 300 pounds. They are in the mountains all day hunting, hiking, and camping. Exactly what Leif and I would love to be able to do. We are sitting around the table chatting and laughing about the old hunting stories my family had when a bat flies into the house. The whole place erupts into a crazy circus. I hear a nasally screeching sound and see my uncle’s wife, Jeannette, on the floor with her mouth wide open. Knowing what the sound is, I turn to tell my mom and the bat swoops down, almost hitting her on the head. She immediately hits the floor, letting out a terrified scream. I laugh at her reaction until the bat swoops down again, almost hitting me in the head. I hit the floor as if I am doing a push-up, laughing as I scream in terror. I had no idea those two expressions could be made at the same time, but it’s possible. I look up to see my grandpa trying to grab at it with the “granny grabber” as my mom calls it. A metal rod with a grip on one end and a pincher on the other. It does not function well as a bat grabber. Roger is trying to get Jeannette to stop making that ridiculous noise by waving his hands around, while also trying to help my grandpa with the granny grabber. At the same time, I look over and see my dad and Leif trying to hit the bat down with a coat and a blanket, none of them succeeding. I’m laughing so hard tears start streaming down my face. My mom is intermittently screaming in terror, laughing, and reciting all the diseases bats can give you. My dad finally hits it with the coat, causing it to fall to the ground. We sigh with relief, but the bat manages to get up again. Another round of chaos begins, until it lands on the windowsill. My grandpa finally manages to grab it with the granny grabber and brings it outside. He lets it go and it flies off. My mom immediately starts bleaching everything that the bat touched.

“Wild animals are not something to play with, people,” my mom says.

“Well, I am pretty sure that’s the funniest bat experience I have ever had,” I say to Leif, wiping the tears from my cheeks. “Hopefully we don’t encounter anything scarier than a bat while we are out, though.”

“If we do, I have my gun,” Leif says as he makes a gun shape with his hand.

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Leif starts the truck and we are ready to head to the mountains. We are still laughing about the bat, knowing we will be telling that story to Trish and Nick. Our adventure is starting out wonderfully, and I feel antsy to continue. We say our goodbyes to my family and head up the road. We are camping not far from where my grandpa lives, but it is in rugged terrain that makes walking hard. I lose cell service halfway up, and turn it on airplane mode. Leif lost service before my grandpa’s place. I inhale the fresh mountain air as we climb in elevation. Each time I inhale, childhood memories come flooding back. It tastes like ponderosa pine trees and sage brush, mixed in with

my grandpa's old jeep. Musty, yet good, somehow. The air has a crisp and clean scent, unlike the polluted air back in Pinescreek. The grass is bright green and the trees are thick. There are unique purple flowers scattered about that I don't remember being there the last time I camped in this area, but they are absolutely gorgeous when mixed with the green grass and the trees. I don't see as many deer as I remember, but it has been a while. We get to our camp spot and set up our tent.

"That pole goes here, and this pole crosses this one diagonally," Leif explains as I am struggling hardcore. "No, honey, that pole goes over to the left. You have the wrong one going into that hole."

"Sorry, it's been awhile."

"It's a good thing you have me, then, isn't it." He walks over and gives me a kiss, laughing at my bad tent skills.

"Isn't it weird that we are the only ones here? Usually this campground is filled to the max."

"I'm sure people will come, it's only Thursday."

"That's true. It still seems odd. At least we have first pick."

"And no one else to hear us at night," he says with a wink.

I chuckle. "That's very true."

That night, we roast some hot dogs and make s'mores. One other couple set up their camp a couple campsites down, but no one else came into the campground. I can't shake the eeriness I feel, especially at night, with all the noises, but I shake it off. Leif shows me the Big Dipper, Little Dipper, and Orion's Belt as we lay in our tent. The mountains are where he feels relaxed and I couldn't be happier. I give Leif a playful smile.

"The only thing I love more than being out here is you," he whispers in my ear.

He kisses me and I sink into it. I gladly let him take over my body, forgetting about the world around us with every touch. Afterward, we drift off to sleep, content with the first day of our adventure.

"What was that noise?"

"Hmm, what noise," Leif mumbles.

"I thought I heard something, maybe from our neighbor's camp."

"I'm sure it's fine, go back to sleep."

I drift off, cuddling closer to Leif. Before I fall completely back to sleep, I hear it again. It sounds like clanking coming from a few feet away. Leif wakes up as it gets louder, then stops.

"Okay, that wasn't just nothing."

"No, that was something, maybe a bear. I'm sure it's okay. Keep the bear spray close and I have the pistol ready."

"You aren't going to check it out?"

"Why would I? It stopped. If it starts up again, I'll go check it out."

We eventually fall asleep again, after not hearing any other sounds for a couple of hours. At first light, Leif wakes me up to go hiking. After a restless night, I want to sleep more, but in order to get to the trailhead at a decent time, we have to leave early. I step out of the tent and start heading to the truck.

"What are you doing?" I ask Leif as he is leaning over something on the ground.

"There are some weird tracks here, I don't know what they are."

I look over his shoulder and see a track shaped like a maple leaf. Pointed edges and a long stem, almost like a tail, make it unique.

"Huh, maybe a bear with a deformed paw?"

"No, it has four pads, almost like a mountain lion."

"Well, whatever it is, it made some loud noises last night."

"Let's keep walking, make sure to grab the bear spray."

We pass by our neighbor's camp and notice their clothes and pans are strewn around the site. We look closer and some of the pans have bite marks in them.

"Maybe we should see if they are okay," I mention to Leif.

"Yeah, not a bad idea. 'Hello? Anyone here?'"

There is nothing but the sound of the creek nearby. All of their gear is strewn about, even their hiking gear. They have to be close.

“We’ve been looking for an hour. They aren’t here.”

“Well, maybe they went on a hike and the animal came after they left.”

“I’m a little freaked out, Leif.”

“It’s fine. Let’s go on our hike and we will check in with them when we get back.”

“You still have the pistol?”

“Right on my belt.”

I jump at every little noise as we are walking. A squirrel ran up a tree, almost giving me a heart attack. Leif is relaxed, but alert as we make our way up the mountain.

“I don’t know how you can be relaxed after everything that just happened.”

“I love the wilderness, I am just glad to be back out in it.”

I see something out of the corner of my eye, it turns out to be a deer hiding in the trees.

“Can we head back to the camp soon? I feel a little jittery.”

“Yeah, we have about a quarter of a mile left, honey.”

I look to the side and see a glimpse of eyes.

“What is that!?”

“What’s what?”

“I saw something over in the trees that definitely was not a deer.”

“I’m sure it was just a moose or something.”

I look back over my shoulder, feeling the hairs stand up on the back of my neck. Nothing is there. I start walking forward again.

“Something isn’t right here.”

“I feel it too. We need to go fast back to the campsite.”

We start jogging and Leif pulls his pistol out.

“Almost back to the campsite. Maybe a few hundred yards,” Leif says as he looks back to see if I am doing okay.

“Leif, in front of you!”

Between us and the campsite, stands an animal that is straight out of hell. It seems to be a mix between a mountain lion and an animal I have never seen before. It has antlers that would make any elk look small, jutting out into awkward angles, almost looking mangled. Its eyes are humanlike, blue and haunting, with a gaze that burns through your skin into your soul. The snout is a burnt orange color and it has a nose bigger and better than a dog. It has the body of a mountain lion crawling around with the finesse only a cat would possess, and a spike coming out of each of the claws, and along the back of its foot. The smell of rotting flesh and burnt hair hits my nose.

“Go right, into the trees. Run!”

We take off, but it follows close behind, gaining on us by the second.

“We won’t outrun it,” I huff out.

“Do you have your phone?”

“Yeah”

“Go off to your left. I’ll fight it off. Find some service and call for help.”

I take off and find some cover. My phone is slow to start up. I look over and Leif has his pistol pointed at the animal. I type in my grandpa’s number, but it won’t connect. I only have one bar, just enough for texting. The air is filled with a loud crack. Leif shot at the animal, but it didn’t budge. I start heading up the hill, trying to find more service. Another loud crack rings out, then two more. I get to the top of the hill, and look down. It’s gaining on Leif. The impacts from the rounds appear to be slowing it down, but not hurting it. I redial my grandpa’s number. No answer. I try my mom’s. No answer. I leave a message with my mom, knowing she is always on her phone. I look down and Leif is gone, along with the animal. It’s starting to get dark. Sunset is in twenty minutes.

“Leif? Where are you?”

Leif comes running out of the trees, blood running down into his eyes. The vibrant red stands out against his white skin, making it look like a scene in a movie. I start running, hoping the animal isn’t following.

“What happened? Where is it?”

“No time...Just run.”

We round the corner. The animal has somehow gotten in front of us. Its spikes are ready to kill.

“What now?” I ask Leif, shaking with fear.

“Shit! Shit, fuck! Stay with me. There are two.”

“Two?”

“We have to go, now!”

I take my phone out and turn on the flashlight. I shine the light on the animal, so I can see it. It lets out a screech and backs away, as if in pain.

“What just happened?” I ask Leif.

“I don’t know, but God must be looking out for us. Let’s go.”

We turn to run, but as soon as I turn the light off, the animals catch up to us. I can’t hear them, which means they are extremely light-footed. We keep the light pointed at them while we run to the campsite. The monsters are still following, but the light from the phone seems to cause their eyes to constrict, hurting them.

“Where is our stuff?” I ask Leif as we get back and find everything gone.

“Shit, these things are smart,” he says, pointing to the trees.

I look up and see all of our clothes and supplies have been put in the highest trees possible. The only thing they couldn’t seem to move was our truck.

“Are the keys on you, Leif?”

“Yeah, in my pocket. I can’t see very well, this damn blood. They got me above my eye.”

“Is it bad? Do we need to wrap it?”

“No. I’m fine.”

“Here, take my sweatshirt to wipe the blood away.” I tie the arms of the sweatshirt around his head to make sure it catches the blood.

“We need to go.”

I get in the truck, and Leif starts it up. I can hear my heart beating, everything else has gone quiet. The wilderness has been silenced. I see one of the animals as it spits out a leg. It has the same shoe as our neighbor. Where the leg falls to the ground, a purple flower grows impossibly fast. The monster inhales the scent of the flower, and its eyes get a deeper shade of blue. It steps closer. The false light seems to be failing at keeping it away.

“Let’s get out of here,” I say, taking a deep breath as we drive away.

We head down the road, as fast as we can go. Only one monster is following us. It’s the one that inhaled the scent of the flower. Fifty, sixty, seventy miles per hour and the animal is keeping up. It finally falls back a little when we get up to a hundred miles per hour.

“My grandpa’s place isn’t far away now. What if it follows us to the house?” I ask Leif.

“I don’t know. Hopefully it doesn’t. What are these things?”

We pull up my grandpa’s driveway, knowing the monster is less than a mile behind us.

“Hello...anyone here?”

I walk into the house. Everything is where it should be with no sign of a struggle.

“Grandpa?”

I grab a few granola bars from the table, along with a bag of candy.

“Jessie, come here.”

Leif is in the shed, pointing to the ground. There is a purple flower in the middle of the floor, and as we keep walking, we find more.

“Shit!” I storm back to the truck.

“I’m sorry, Jessie.”

“Let’s go. It’s probably just about here.”

We head back out and I see the animal a little ways behind us.

“What now?” I ask.

“We go report it to the police, I guess.”

As we turn the corner, almost to the interstate, the animal catches up and jumps on the truck.

“Get it off!”

“I’m trying!”

Leif swerves back and forth, but the spikes dig even deeper into the truck.

“Shoot it, Jessie!”

“What? I don’t know how…”

“Jessie, do it!”

I grab the gun, close my eyes, and shoot.

“Don’t close your eyes, dammit! You have to aim.”

The animal starts hitting the windshield, trying to get in. I aim and shoot. My ears start ringing and I see the animal is stunned. I shoot again and it loosens its hold. Just as it starts to fall off, it grabs Leif’s arm. I shoot it again, but it doesn’t let go. I pull out his pocket knife and try to cut the animal away. I hear a snap and Leif lets out a scream. His bone is sticking out of his arm, near his elbow.

“Oh fuck!” I say as I try not to throw up.

The animal finally falls off, and I take over the wheel as Leif is still hitting the gas.

“We need to get you to a hospital.”

“Yeah, you need to drive,” Leif grunts out.

We stop for a split second to switch places and I get on the interstate. The animal seems to fall back, heading into the woods again.

“Don’t look at it,” I tell Leif. “It will make it worse.”

“Too late,” he says after looking down. “Those demons better die.”

“I don’t know how, but I hope they do.”

After driving for what felt like an eternity, we arrive at the hospital in Pinescreek. As they are taking Leif back, my phone starts ringing.

“Mom? Is that you?”

“What is going on? I’ve been worried sick. We left grandpa’s place shortly after you did.”

“Oh, mom, I don’t know what just happened.”

I tell her everything about the animals and grandpa’s place, tears streaming down my cheeks as I realize the full extent of it. She calls in a report for me, as I go to be with Leif. It is Friday night, but it feels like we were in the woods for a year.

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“Are you ready for your appointment?” I ask Leif, putting on my coat.

“Yeah, I just have to find my keys.”

“In your pocket?”

“No, I checked there.”

“I mean your coat pocket.”

“Oh, found them.”

“How’s your arm feeling, today?”

“The same.”

“Hopefully physical therapy will help the pain.”

I drop Leif off at the doctor, and run into town to grab some groceries. It’s been four months since our encounter with what the government now calls the Bastet Lions. The paw print looks like a mountain lion track, and Bastet Lion means the “mother of all lions.” The only sign of what we encountered was a paw print. No other evidence has been found. So far they’ve learned that they only inhabit that particular part of the woods, because the purple flower doesn’t grow anywhere else.

Leif has extensive nerve damage in his left arm, making it unbearably painful. The doctor believes physical therapy will help, but is not positive. He is taking off work while he heals, and spends most of his time in the woods. Despite what happened, he still loves it there. I have yet to go back out, although I do want to.

After I pick up some groceries, I stop by work.

“Hey, Nick. I’m surprised to see you here on a Saturday.”

“Hey, Jessie. You know me, always working. I was about to call you. Trish has something planned for you at seven tonight. She wants you to be available and ready in your best outfit.”

“Oh, really. Does this have to do with the surprise planned before our camping trip?”

“That’s all she told me.”

“Okay, tell her it’s done,” I say as I grab my notebook filled with drafts for my novel.

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I put on the other earring, completing my outfit for tonight. Leif comes around the corner, dressed in his most expensive attire yet. A nice blue button up shirt that matches my dress, and dress pants. We picked the blue to match the color of my eyes.

“You look beautiful”

“And you don’t look so bad, either,” I say as I check the time. “It’s seven. I think Trish knows we’re leaving.”

“Well, how could she not. You only talk about Paris every day,” he says with a smirk.

“Well, we haven’t officially made the decision.”

“Jess, we both have jobs lined up in Paris, the most romantic and adventurous place in the world. It’s official. You are going to be an author in one of the most inspiring places, and I am going to get back to doing what I love. Being out in the woods doing some consultant forestry. Of course Trish knows.”

“Yeah, but you haven’t mentioned to anyone that you are also going to be tracking those monsters to get more information. Someone reported an event similar to ours thousands of years ago. I doubt it’s the same thing.”

“Well, then you know I will be safe.”

Trish honks, letting us know it’s time, and we head out the door. She brings us to her place and it’s transformed into a going away party. I enjoy the last night in Pinescreek, the last night with my friends and family, but my mind is still occupied with thoughts and nightmares from the Bastet Lions. No one else in that area reported seeing anything, not even the purple flowers. Everyone acts like it was a bear that looked different, but I know what I saw. I need some space and go into the empty and abandoned backyard. I take some deep breaths, reveling in the peaceful night. My earring falls and I bend down to pick it up, only to see a group of purple flowers at my feet.