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Mountain Views

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“Hah!” June yelled. “HAH!” she screamed, her yell echoing through the trees as her final swing connected with the huge cat's nose. He jumped back and growled again. She held her stick in front of her, pointed at the green eyes still locked on hers. She felt like a rabbit, transfixed by hypnotic predator's eyes. They held that way for a second, a day, a year.

The lion wheeled on its feet suddenly and turned away from her. As it loped silently away into the trees, the tip of its tail swished once-twice, back and forth. June watched it go for a few steps, her breath ragged. The big cat slipped between two stumps and was gone, vanished into the woods. She gripped the stick in her hand hard, but she couldn't yet feel the bark biting into her abraded palms, little pieces of wood grinding into raw flesh. She turned her head toward the bushes next to the trail. They were covered in lush, green leaves, she saw, and the remnants of spring flowers still clung to them. She turned her head as if to consider this fact, this way and that, then was abruptly and quietly sick into the leaves.

It was well past dark when June returned to her campsite. The night had brought a chill with it, and she shivered as she fumbled with her car keys. The bandanna wrapped around her right hand was stiff with dried blood, making her movements clumsy and slow. She was finally able to slide the key home, unlock her car, and crawl into the passenger seat. She’d left a blanket in the car, and she draped it over her shoulders before opening up the cooler in the backseat. The first thing she found in the cooler was a package of thin-sliced turkey, and she ate it piece by piece, holding the package in her clawed, aching right hand.

She sat in her car for about two hours, she thought, before she made her way back out to her tent. Her clothes were easy to pack up; those she just threw loosely into the passenger footwell. She rolled up her sleeping bag as quickly as she could. Each time she heard a noise outside, she froze, terrified and wide-eyed until she could convince herself the cat wasn’t coming back. While she was rolling up her tent, she heard a crackle behind her, maybe the sound of paws on pine needles, and swung around with a tent stake in her left hand, breathing hard. There was nothing there: no teeth, no fur, no claws. Her stomach roiled, and she took a step away from the half-rolled tent in case she had to be sick again. When she wasn’t, she gathered the rest of the tent in a bunch and stuffed it in her trunk. She kept her car headlights turned off as she wound her way out of the snarl of camp road.

In the morning, the campground host found June’s campsite empty. She had left behind a sleeping bag and inflatable mattress, he saw, and what looked like a brand new pair of hiking boots. Free, read the note tucked into the right boot. Sorry, no coffee this morning.