

The Deer and the Lion.

One late evening, a man came out of his house; it was dark, snowing, and freezing outside. The man went out to see why his motion-activated light kept coming on. To his surprise, there was a tiny fawn shivering in the freezing night and so skinny he could see its ribs. He thought the fawn was about six months old, but it was small because it was young, but more so because it was dangerously malnourished. As he approached, the fawn attempted to run but stumbled and fell face-first into the deep, powdery snow. The man hurried to the fawn, picked it up, and tried warming it with body heat. The fawn's fur was wet to its skin, and it now shivered uncontrollably from the cold and fear. The man took the fawn inside, quieted his dogs, and then took it into his garage, which was warmer and drier than outside, and there were no dogs in his garage to upset it further. He fed the fawn lettuce and wild bird seed and put a small bowl of tepid water down for it to drink. He flipped the fawn upside down to see what sex it was, then sat with her for several hours until she stopped shivering. He erected a small enclosure so she wouldn't hurt herself amongst all his equipment. The fawn was so weak that he didn't need to worry about her jumping out of the enclosure, so he left her and went in for the night. He couldn't help but get out of his warm bed several times to check on her during the night.

The following day, Howard drove the seventy-mile round trip to the nearest feed store to buy deer food for the fawn. The fawn stayed in Howard's garage for the next several days while the snow piled up higher and higher, and though she was still wild and distrustful of humans, the fawn would now calmly watch from a safe distance as her food was placed in a large, round tin for her to eat.

Once the snow stopped falling, Howard opened the garage door, and the fawn jumped through the door like an athlete performing the standing long jump. The fawn quickly disappeared,

leaving a deep track through the powdery snow, and almost as quickly, she reappeared to eat once again and drink. As the days and weeks began to pass, the fawn became stronger and stronger; she had put on weight, and she no longer had the skeletal look of a dying baby deer. When spring arrived months later, the now nearly one-year-old female was gone for extended periods. One day, she returned with a fine-looking buck; his antlers were covered in velvet, and he was very handsome. The buck, though, did not come onto Howard's property with the doe, but instead, he stood watching her from inside a small copse of trees on his neighbor's property. The doe didn't mind since this meant she wasn't being disturbed by the constant attention of the buck and could eat in peace.

Howard noticed the doe was getting fat and surmised she was pregnant. In the coming weeks, the doe was now obviously pregnant; her udders dropped visibly, and she disappeared for several days. When she returned, her belly was visibly smaller, and she would quickly eat and leave again. After nearly two weeks, she returned one morning, only this time she had two fawns with her. They were tiny, timid, but strong, with camouflage markings on their backs. They trusted their mother, so it only took a couple of days before they, too, began to behave calmer when they came onto Howard's property. The fawns would leap high into the air for no apparent reason other than they could. As time went by, Howard noticed they were both boys. As the fawns grew more comfortable with Howard's presence, he put his chair where they ate and offered them food in tins, which he held in his hands. First, one and then the other grew brave enough to eat out of the cans he held out for them.

They grew up to be strong and healthy, and as winter approached, most deer who had arrived during the spring began their migration down to lower elevations to escape the fierce winter that was about to happen again. But the doe and her fawns didn't migrate. At first, Howard was

concerned and confused but realized that this doe didn't know about migrating since she had never been shown what it was or how to do it. All she knew was that this man's place was safe, that she would be fed, and that he was safe for her and her fawns, so she stayed near him for the winter. This routine continued; she had a fawn or two every year, she would bring her fawns to meet her human friend, and more of her family would join her at feeding time.

Sometimes, a fawn or young deer got killed by a car or truck; sometimes, one would disappear, and the man figured it was because a mountain lion or a bear got it. For the past two years, the doe Howard had named Mama had not had a fawn survive through winter. Mama's single fawn of the previous year had been hit and killed by a car, and her twins of this year had not returned with her after the deep December snow storms. At first, Mama and Howard would look several times a day to see if the fawns had returned, and Mama would leave and look for them. But, after a couple of weeks and the fawns had not returned, Mama calmed down. So now the deer coming to Howard's were Mama and her twin boys from several years ago, whom Howard had named Lefty and Righty. Neither Lefty nor Righty had ever learned to migrate, so they stayed over the winter, and each came to Howard's place both morning and evening for food.

After several days of rain, winter again turned bitterly cold, and the deep, wet snow froze solid. The snowplows clearing the road left high, impenetrable slabs of icy snow on both sides of the road, like concrete walls, and the only openings were the driveways of the people who lived there full-time.

Mama was gone for days, which became weeks and soon more than a month. His neighbor Al showed Howard a picture of a mountain lion he had captured on a game camera he had installed, and Howard was sure Mama had gotten killed by the lion.

Then, one day, Mama returned to Howard's for some food. Howard, his wife Sally, and Al were all jubilant at seeing Mama again. But Mama was skittish, constantly pulling her head up and scanning for danger. Mama often stopped eating mid-chew and listened intensely, not moving a muscle. It was evident to all that she sensed danger was around and was scared and very uneasy. Howard's neighbor had also gotten to know this deer. She was a female who had had multiple fawns in the six years he had seen her, and very slowly, he had gotten to be friends with her. Al was friends with Mama, but she never liked Al as much as the man who had saved her. When Mama finally approached him for the first time, Al reached out his hand, and she touched her wet nose to the back of his outstretched hand as a sign of friendship. The simple thrill of that moment stayed with Al even months later, as if it had happened only minutes before; such was the power of her friendship. When hungry, she would stand in Al's driveway and stare at his cabin. Al would go outside when he noticed her, telling her to wait while he got her food. Al approached her slowly and held the tin of food in his now outstretched hand so she could reach it. Finally, when she felt safe, she would take a step or two forward and eat. Anything he did that was out of what was ordinary to her caused alarm. If he moved his other hand, she would take a step back from him, reminding him constantly that she was wild, and if Howard's dogs barked, which she had now heard for years, she left. Mama acted entirely on her feelings and instincts. So now that Al had gotten to know a deer, both from his physical interactions and reading articles about deer and their behavior, he began to treat all deer differently, treating the ones he knew personally with friendship and compassion.

Al and Howard often talked about the deer and their predators. And Al thought about what he called the known and unknown dichotomy. For instance, instead of a fawn, how would they be thinking now if the fawn Howard found had been a mountain lion cub instead? If they had

gotten to know a cub this well, would they now feel differently about the mountain lion and its predatory instincts? The two men knew that this was nature they were witnessing, and interfering was dangerous. But they cared about her because they had gotten to know this deer. Two years earlier, Al had heard a strange, loud noise coming from outside his cabin, a noise that he could not identify. He went outside twice, but since it was still too dark to see, he yelled at the noise, thinking he could scare off whatever was making such harsh and loud noises. Finally, he went into his bedroom and turned the outside light on, and to his complete surprise, there was a mountain lion and a raccoon engaged in a life-or-death fight. The man watched for half an hour as the fight continued until suddenly, the mountain lion flipped the full-grown raccoon from one side of his body to the other, slamming it onto the ground. The sudden, hard landing dazed the raccoon, allowing the lion to bite the raccoon's throat, eventually suffocating it.

Al slowly went outside to video the scene as the mountain lion rested over its kill. The lion was only ten feet away, and everything seemed calm and relaxed. The lion turned its head and stared at Al, then raised its head, straightened its front legs, and moved his head first towards one shoulder and then towards the other as if stretching his neck in anticipation of further conflict. That was enough for Al, and he slowly and carefully backed up until he was inside his cabin, shutting the sliding glass door slowly and silently on his way in.

Several of his neighbors, who worried about their dogs or cats, and some even worried about their children, having heard about Al's encounter with the lion, asked him why he had not shot the lion, and he had to confess that he had not even considered doing such a thing. He could tell that a couple of neighbors were aggravated by the fact that he had not shot the mountain lion, but that wasn't who he was.

One evening, after Mama had been gone for two days, she appeared on Al's driveway on her way from Howard's house. She was stopped and staring at his cabin, and Al could tell even from inside his place that something was wrong, so he went out and shouted to Mama to hang on, and he told her he was getting her some food. Mama knew the routine by now, so she waited for him. As Al approached her, he slowed even more, aware that she was hyper-skittish today. Finally, after he stood still, except for rattling the food tin, Mama approached him and began eating from the can he held out for her. But again and again, she stopped mid-chew, raised her head, and listened intently. As Al watched her, telling her softly that she was fine and that nothing would bother her while she was with him, he noticed a large piece of skin missing from her rib cage and another slightly smaller patch from her rear thigh. Al had gotten to know Mama well by now, and he had never seen her this scared and anxious. Yes, he could see Mama had escaped an attack from a mountain lion, and he was imploring her to stay on his or Howard's property as it was safer than anywhere else. As Mama finished her tin of food and walked away, she was no longer paying any attention to Al; all her attention was again focused on her surroundings.

Al telephoned Howard and relayed what had happened, and Howard mentioned he had also seen the patches of missing skin. But now, now that Al had gotten to know Mama, now that she had touched his hand with her wet nose, now that he cared for her, now that he had worried for her, now when the neighbor who had saved Mama said to him "You had your chance to shoot the mountain lion, and you didn't take it," he was silenced for a little while as he thought about that statement. Both were intelligent, shrewd men who showed good judgment in most things, and each was entitled to his own opinions.

An adult mountain lion, living a solitary life, had moved onto the little Peninsula after a monstrous, nearly one-million-acre wildfire had burned most everything to a cinder within thirty miles of the Peninsula six months earlier. Many animals, from bears to lions to deer to birds, moved onto the untouched Peninsula for food and safety. The Peninsula was one of only a few undamaged after the monster forest fire burned past the Peninsula. For tens of miles in every direction, forests and towns were incinerated.

The count for the number of foxes, rabbits, deer, lions, frogs, mice, coyotes, bears, and other animals, plus birds, rodents, insects, and fish killed by the massive wildfire, was listed as inconceivable. As the forest fire had now passed the Peninsula, many displaced animals moved onto the Peninsula, thus increasing both the number of predators and the amount of prey. Still, the number of predators grew significantly.

At first, the lion had wandered into the areas where humans lived, and it knew instinctively, deep in his genes, that he was not safe nor wanted there. So, he roamed the outer boundaries of where dogs barked and where motion-activated lights and cameras turned on and off as he passed. He soon learned that in the early mornings, most dogs were still inside, and he quickly got used to the lights turning on and off and the clicks from the cameras.

At first, hunting was easy. His prey did not know he had arrived, and they were caught off guard, but that ignorance did not last long. Soon, the jackrabbits changed their schedules, the raccoons and foxes stopped venturing far from the safety of their dens, and soon, the humans began keeping their beloved pets indoors at night.

The amount of prey began to diminish, but the number of predators was still high.

The adult lion had grown hungry. It had attacked Mama the night before, but she got away, losing a large piece of skin from her rib cage and another, though not as large, part of the skin from her thigh, yet Mama somehow had escaped the grip of the lion's fierce claws.

Now, as the day turned to night, the lion waited again, crouched in the debris of the unburned and unmanaged forest, feeling, smelling, and hearing the deer coming. The deer was wary, moving slowly and cautiously, anticipating the danger she so keenly sensed. The deer's forward movements always included many muscles ready to spring her out of harm's way at any split second. Deer, including this deer, are often called the ghosts of the forest because they move smoothly and quietly, thus never calling attention to themselves with sudden movements or noise.

The lion's muscles were like coiled springs, taut and ready to snap with all the stored energy.

The lion waited in anticipation of killing this deer. The lion was coiled tight, yet he was experienced being like this. In this mode, the lion was fully alert and ready so that he could and would pounce when the time came. The lion had a long-established style of hunting that had proved very successful since he had left his pride. He was four years old, a full one hundred and eighty pounds of solid and powerful muscles, teeth, and claws. He was quite literally a killing machine.

The only movement from the lion was his long, round tail, slowly swishing back and forth in anticipation.

The only movements from the doe were her calculated steps forward and the continuous rotation of her ears as she scanned her surroundings.

Then, at precisely the same time, the doe was visible to the lion, and the lion was visible to the doe. Both animals sprang with a single, fluid, effortless action and reaction. One animal sprang to kill, and the other animal sprang to flee.

This encounter had been happening since predators and prey existed on this planet. The number of times this had happened was another uncountable number, yet it had happened again and would continue to happen until time itself stopped.

Al was worried when Mama didn't arrive the next day. He felt dread, and it was difficult for him to garner any optimism that Mama had survived, especially after seeing her missing pieces of skin. All day, he hoped he would see her. Lefty and Righty visited at one point, and while Al was happy to see them, he was also sad not to see Mama.

Al was an early riser, and as he stood drinking his second cup of coffee just after dawn the following day, he opened his drapes. Mama was standing in his driveway, looking up at him with an expression on her face: "*Well? Are you coming to feed me or what?*"

The End.

Written by Peter Skeels, author/writer © 3-14 -22