

## **The Deer and the Lion**

One late evening a man came out of his house; it was dark, snowing, and freezing cold. The man came outside to see why his motion activated light kept coming on. There, to his surprise, was a tiny fawn, shivering in the freezing cold, and so skinny he could clearly see its ribs. He thought the fawn was about six months old, but it was tiny in size due to being so malnourished. As he approached the fawn, it 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 his body heat. The fawn's fur was wet to its skin, and it now shivered uncontrollably both from the cold and from 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 he put a small bowl of tepid water down for it to drink. He flipped the fawn upside down to see what sex it was, and then he sat with her for several hours until she stopped shivering. He erected a small enclosure so she wouldn't hurt herself in amongst all his equipment. The fawn was so weak he didn't need to worry about her jumping out of the enclosure, so he left her there and went in for the night. He couldn't help but to get out of his warm bed several times to check on her during the night.

The next morning 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 once again eat 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 emaciated look of a dying baby deer.

When spring arrived months later, the now nearly one year old female was gone for much longer periods of time. 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 at all since this meant she wasn't being disturbed by the constant attention of the buck, and she was also able to eat in peace.

Howard noticed the doe was getting fat, and he surmised she was pregnant. In the coming weeks the doe became obviously pregnant, her udders dropped visibly, and then she disappeared for several days. When she returned, her belly was visibly smaller, she would quickly eat and leave again. After nearly two weeks of this she returned one morning only this time she had two fawns with her. They were tiny and timid, but strong and with camouflage markings on their backs.

They totally 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 then the other grew brave enough to eat out of the tins he held.

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

Howard was concerned and confused but then he realized that this doe didn't know about migrating since she had never been shown what migration was or how to do it. All she knew was that this man's place was safe, that she would be fed, that he was safe for her and her fawns to be around, and so she stayed near him for the winter. Every year this routine continued, every year she had a fawn or two, every year she would bring her fawns to meet her human friend, and every year 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 simply disappear, and the man figured it was because a mountain lion or a bear got it. For the past two years the doe, which 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 come back, and Mama would leave and go look for them. But, after a couple of weeks had passed and the fawns had not returned Mama calmed down. So now the deer coming to Howard's were Mama and her two twin boys from several years ago, that Howard had named Lefty and Righty. Neither Lefty nor Righty had ever learned to migrate either, so they also 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 walls of concrete like slabs of icy snow on both sides of the roads, and the only openings were the driveways of the people who lived there fulltime.

Mama was gone for days, which then became weeks, which then became more than a month.

His neighbor Al showed Howard a picture of a mountain lion he had captured on a game camera he 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 very skittish, and she was constantly pulling her head up and scanning for danger. Mama would often stop eating mid-chew, and just listen intensely, not moving a muscle. It was obvious to all that she sensed danger all around, and that she 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 6 years he had seen her and very slowly he had gotten to be friends with her. Al was friends with Mama but never like the man who had saved her. When Mama finally came up to him for the first time, Al reached out his hand and she touched her wet nose to the back of his outstretched hand in 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 she was hungry, she would stand in Al's driveway and stare at his cabin. Al, when he noticed her, would go outside 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 in her. 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 simply left. Mama acted completely on her feelings and instincts.

So now that Al had gotten to know a deer, both from his physical interactions and from reading

articles about deer and their behavior, he began to treat all deer differently, and the ones he knew personally he treated with friendship and compassion.

Al and Howard often talked about the deer and their predators. And Al thought about what he called the dichotomy of the known and the unknown. For instance, instead of a fawn how would they be thinking now if the fawn Howard found had been a mountain lion cub? 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 for sure that this was nature they were witnessing, and interfering was dangerous. But because they had gotten to know this deer, they cared about her. Two years earlier Al had heard a very 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 towards the noise thinking he could scare off whatever it was that 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 side, and he was then able to grab the raccoon by its throat, killing it. As the mountain lion rested over its kill, Al slowly went outside to video the scene. The lion was literally only ten to twelve feet from him, and everything seemed calm and relaxed at first. The lion turned its head and stared at Al, then raised its head, straightened its front legs, moved his head first towards one shoulder and then towards the other shoulder, as if he was 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 neighbors were aggravated by the fact that he had not shot the mountain lion, but there was nothing he could do now.

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 cabin that something was wrong so he went out and shouted to Mama to hang on, and that he was getting her some food. Mama knew the routine by now, so she waited for him. As Al got near 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 tin 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 was going to bother her while she was with him, he noticed a large piece of skin missing from her rib cage, and another patch, slightly smaller, missing 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; and all her attention was once 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 men were shrewd and each man showed good judgement 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 monster, nearly million-acre wildfire 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 Peninsula in search of food and safety. The Peninsula was one of only a few places left undamaged after the monster forest fire burned past the Peninsula. For literally tens of miles in every direction, forests and towns were incinerated.

The count on the number of foxes, rabbits, deer, lions, frogs, mice, coyotes, bears, and other animals, plus birds, rodents, insects and fish, which were killed by the massive wild fire, 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, but the number of predators was great.

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 by.

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 jack rabbits had changed their schedules, soon 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, piece of 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 in anticipation of the danger she so keenly sensed. The deer's forward movements always included a significant number of 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 in them. The lion waited in anticipation of killing this deer. The lion was coiled tight yet he was experienced with being like this. For the lion being like this was to be fully alert, so when the time came, he could and would pounce. The lion had a long-established style of hunting that had proved very successful since he had left his pride. He was now four years old, a full one hundred and eighty pounds of strong, 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 the exact same moment, 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 was an encounter that had been happening since there were predators and prey on this planet. The number of times this had happened was another inconceivable number, and yet it had happened again now and would continue to happen until time itself stopped.

Al worried when Mama didn't arrive the next day. He had a feeling of 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. At one point Lefty and Righty visited and while Al was happy to see them too, 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 next morning, he opened his drapes, and there was Mama standing in his driveway looking up at him, with an expression on her face of, *Well, are you coming to feed me or what?*

The End.