

Alanna Simmons

Untitled

I like to think of myself as an environmentalist. I separate, with care, the recyclable plastics from the rest of the garbage. I drive a fuel-efficient vehicle, and I oppose drilling in the Alaskan National Wildlife Refuge. I am also a staunch supporter, and executor, of the Leave No Trace ideal, which purports leaving the wilderness just as you entered it (and picking up the waste of others who were not so conscientious). But an encounter with a fellow predator on a late-night hike caused me to question how much of my environmental consciousness was ideals and how much of it was a reality.

My boyfriend Josh and I had gone up to the San Bernardino National Forest for a day of climbing, followed by a day of hiking. After finishing a multi-pitch climb at an area known as Tahquitz, we planned to putz around the little mountain town of Idyllwild, sleep in our car at the National Forest parking lot and rise with the sun to hike to the summit of Mt. San Jacinto. The peak of the mountain is the second highest point in Southern California at 10,834 feet, and Josh and I wanted to gaze off of that awesome vista. According to the California State Park brochure of Mt. San Jacinto, "John Muir once remarked that this unmatched view was 'the most sublime spectacle to be found anywhere on this earth.'" While I do not subscribe to the He-Who-Climbs-The-Highest-Mountain-Triumphs philosophy, I do tend to defer to John Muir's judgment.

After wandering around Idyllwild testing the various businesses, from the local goat milk lotions to the Mexican cuisine, we drove back to the trail-head parking lot. As we crested the hill, we heard loud blaring music that seemed at odds with the thick pine trees, warbling birds, and low, soft sun. Soon the silence defecators were within our sight. A group of men sat on the back end of a beat-up truck, smoking weed and drinking beer. They blasted bad rock music from their crackling stereo, and loudly yelled profanities about how everyone was "a fucking idiot" and that women were a bunch of "stupid bitches." We parked several spaces down from them, and Josh left to use the outhouse.

"Hey pretty girl . . . hey! Over here! Damn, look at those lips . . . Hey! I'm talking to you . . . that bitch is ignoring us . . . what a stupid, fucking bitch."

I stared woodenly ahead, seemingly in a trance. Josh came back and the boys directed their attention back to one another, their verbal assault silenced by his presence.

"I can't sleep here."

Josh looked at me for a moment, responded with a quiet, "Okay", and drove the car to the opposite side of the parking lot next to the outhouses. The warm smell of stagnant shit washed over our senses but it was a welcome exchange to be farther out of earshot of the belligerent boys.

We sat in the car in silence. I hated humanity at that moment for the way the guys had leered at me, the way it had made me feel dirty, like a "stupid bitch", and my limited course of options, namely stoicly ignoring them. I could no longer hear what they were saying, but their music and barking laughter still filtered over. Not sharing any of this with Josh, not wanting him to feel the need to defend my honor, we sat in silence. He knew, though, that my brooding quiet hinted of unhappiness and the perpetrators were still going strong, poisoning their bodies and our air space.

"Let's do it now."

"What?"

"Let's do the hike right now."

"Josh, it 6:30! The sun will be down in another two hours. It's a 16-mile hike!"

"It'll be fun. And that way, we won't have to sleep here with them as neighbors."

That was the selling point.

"And this is safe? We won't get lost?"

"Yeah. We'll just take the pack and fill it with the head lamps, food and water just as if we had left tomorrow."

Remembering a past over-zealous hiking trip in which we had gotten lost after nightfall and had resorted to laying on the side of a sloped hill with our bodies curled together in an attempt to maintain some warmth, any warmth, in dropping temperatures caused me to question the proposition.

"It's safe? Joshua, look at me. You wouldn't take me anywhere that wasn't safe?"

Our eyes met. He smiled. "I wouldn't take you anywhere that wasn't safe."

What I didn't know at the time was that the safety declaration that I needed was impossible to give. But like parents tucking you in and checking for monsters underneath the bed long after you believe in monsters, sometimes security feels good even if it's false.

"Let's do it."

A huge grin erupted on his face. We loaded up the pack with four liters of water, wool beanie caps, headlamps, a map, trail mix, snickers, and jackets. As we walked away from the car, it felt good. The sun was nearing the ridge line and an alpine glow filled the valley. The trees looked greener, the granite looked coarser, the clouds looked fuller, and it smelled great, like vitality, like life. Twilight was nearing and we took off at a brisk pace.

We didn't talk much for the first several miles because we were so intent on covering as much ground as possible before it got dark and we would be dependent on our flashlights. My legs burned lightly, but it felt good. They were working. I breathed deeply, rhythmically, focusing on allowing the maximum amount of oxygen to enter, then exit, my body. I didn't want the altitude to affect me.

The view around us was amazing. We were climbing out of the valley to the closest ridge line and, looking back, the way we had come was cloaked in shadow. Like a pale, willowy woman with a black silk nightgown draped lazily across her, the mountains were part dark shadow and part luminescent forest. Like the beginning of time, there was darkness and then there was light.

When we could no longer see well about two hours in, we stopped to have snack and put on our head lamps. The former languid beauty of twilight had been replaced with the fuzzy lines of near-night, and in my overactive mind, the surroundings were indefinable and a little scary.

Unfortunately for us, the sliver of a moon that was forecast for that night was so low on the horizon that we never ever saw it. Putting on our headlamps, we were immediately transported into the vortex that artificial light creates. My visibility went from fuzzy shapes everywhere to frighteningly bright clarity right in front of me and complete blackness everywhere else. The trail was clear in front of me, along with Josh's back, but everything else had vanished into the void of blackness except for the vague occasional outline of the ridge, or a rock, or a tree. My night vision was shot and what had been replaced was definitely inferior. I felt like I was in a bubble; a spotlight to man and beast alike. If there had been any sort of moonlight to illuminate our path, I would have kept my flashlight exactly where it belonged: in the pack.

We continued onward, upward, into the sea of darkness. Normally an avid outdoors lady, I would, at any time, have hastily chosen the company of wild animals, a clear breeze, and wide expanses of whistling trees over any form of civilization. But in that hour at that place, I felt disjointed with the wildness that surrounded me. Like a walking lantern, I illuminated a small sphere, thus isolating me from the very nature I had escaped to. Instead of relishing in the rustling sounds of night, I wondered what was out there that I couldn't see. And instead of enjoying the constellations, I cursed them for not cradling a bright, illuminating moon in their midst to naturally alight my path. This thought process, however, showed me that I was no better than the civilization that I sought to escape. Ultimately I strove to align nature with my needs.

The ascent continued and we traversed across streams, wove through ferns and ducked under low-lying branches. The terrain changed as the elevation increased. The dense forest atmosphere transitioned into scattered pine trees and large, bulbous granite deposits. We were nearing the top. A couple miles later, we came to a large hill of boulders and hopped, scrambled, and leapt from boulder to boulder to the top of the mountain. We had made it in record time.

Josh sighed contentedly and dropped his pack to a wide, flat rock. We looked at the Sierra Club medallion proclaiming that we were indeed on a tall mountain, worthy of their stamp, and decided not to sign their registry. Josh laid back, looked at the stars, and unwrapped a Snickers bar.

"What are you doing?"

Mouth full, eyebrow cocked, he waited.

"I'm ready to go. I don't want to be here anymore. I want to go. What if we get lost on the way back? I want to go."

In the blackness, his face turned skyward so I could only see the rugged outline of his jaw because I had turned off my light, he responded with a quiet "Just let me finish my Snickers." In those few moments, I took a breath, told myself that I needed to learn more relaxation techniques or take less night hikes, and actually looked around me. The stars were amazing. They were so bright and so beautiful that they almost seemed like their own religion, with a wealth of meaning and salvation in their midst.

Doggedly, we began our descent. It was nearing midnight, and the whole world had a subtle stillness to it. We were mentally and physically tired, having hiked about eight miles up a significant climb in elevation, so we hiked in silence. In a few more hours, we would have been up for twenty four hours because we had risen early for climbing the day before, so my fear was abating as exhaustion set in. Just keep going, I told myself.

We followed the windy trail down and looked carefully for the little rock piles we had created when the trail had become confusing. We knocked them down as we passed them. Josh set a steady, methodical pace and maintained it. His pack swung rhythmically from my vantage point in the rear. After about forty-five minutes of hiking in complete silence, we came around a sharp bend in the trail. He happened to look up across the long stretch of trail in front of us, and he abruptly came to a complete stop. I ran into him.

"Woa! What happened? Why did you stop?"

Silence.

"Josh?"

"I think there's a mountain lion on the trail."

His broad back blocked my view and a little part of me thought that he was mistaken. I mean, what were the odds? But the other part of me knew that we were in mountain lion country, that it was midnight, and that Josh and I were not behaving like normal humans because of the

hour we were out and the completely quiet way that we had been walking. I put my hand to his arm and felt it shaking. In the entire time that I've known my boyfriend he has been fearless in all mediums of life. At that moment, his arm spoke to me in a way that his words couldn't.

Throughout most of my formative years, I have grown up in a desolate part of Utah with a geologist dad that has taught me to respect every aspect of nature; even the predators. Instead of teaching me how to shoot the heads off of Rattlers (like some of my friends' dads), he taught me how to avoid that venomous snake, and how, in a worst case scenario, to tie a bandana around the bitten area to avoid spreading the venom to your whole body before you could seek medical attention. This outlook affected the way I thought of California's predators as well. I always felt a wave of pity for the bears, mountain lions, and sharks that threatened their human neighbors. I wondered why, as is the case with black bears in the Sierras, we made them dependent on our food and then complained about this dependence and the resulting threatening presence. On the Yosemite National Park website, they acknowledged that:

The history of interactions between humans and black bears in Yosemite is a long one, marked by some periods that we now look upon as shameful. Early in the park's history, little was done to keep bears from becoming conditioned to human food. Garbage was readily available in developed areas, and little was done to discourage visitors from feeding bears. Indeed, the National Park Service maintained several "bear pits" in the park where bears were fed garbage in an attempt to keep them out of park campgrounds and lodging areas, and to provide visitor entertainment. Human injuries were common, and many bears were killed in the name of public safety.

Or, in the case of mountain lions, "Backwoods Living Magazine" observed that "Human populations relentlessly encroach on the lions' domains while laws protecting them or regulating their depredation have increased the lion population" (Sheley). Humans encroach upon their habitat, scaring off some of the mountain lions' natural prey, and at the same time, in places like California, are protected from hunters, thus skyrocketing their population. The dilemmas of increased population but reduced habitat space sets the stage for problems.

So with this wide berth of beliefs and indignation within me, I faced my boyfriend's back. The one major thing I could remember about mountain lions was that "the operating word in a lion encounter is 'unpredictability'" (Sheley). Nudging my face around his arm, I swept my light along the dusty expanse of the trail. At first I didn't see anything and then my light caught two greenish, glowing, slanted eyes staring at us. When I saw the lions eyes, I tasted the cottony thickness of fear in my mouth. This animal did not fear us. He was looking at us brazenly, quietly perusing us just as we were perusing him. Josh crouched down, careful not to bend over, and handed me a rock. Then he handed me one of his walking sticks. We spoke little to no words. Survival instincts ran strong and spoke their own language.

"Yell with me. Wave the pole and yell at the top of your lungs. We have to intimidate him and establish that we are not prey."

"Okay."

We yelled as loud as we could and our voices seemed harsh and unnatural in the night air. Clutching the rock as a lifeline and waving the pole, I tried to yell with a low, gravelly voice instead of just shrilly screaming, which is what I wanted to do. And the lion just looked at us, not moving at all, with his glowing green eyes. He seemed to be deciding what to do. We yelled again and he moved a little this time, by a few feet, before settling his unervingly calm gaze back on us. I had no doubt that he was commander of this encounter and that he could hear the fear in our voices. I could hear the fear.

I hated him then. I hated him for his cool, glowing eyes and for the arrogance that I thought I saw. I was not in control.

I took a deep, steadying breath in a moment of quiet and prepared myself for the possibility of death. I knew that being killed by a mountain lion was rare, but in that moment, it was a possibility. I readied myself to fight like hell to the end, but if the end was there, to be strong enough to let go. Dignity in death so to speak.

He moved a little toward us, the eyes swaying with his limber, agile gait. We let out one more yell, and this one had a little anger in it. We did not want to feel like prey anymore. We wanted to feel like predators, ready to fight an opponent. He felt it or heard it and his eyes disappeared. We scanned the chest-high brush for his eyes. Nothing. We continued to make wide scans of the area with our lamps, but there was so little we could see and so many places to hide. Our voices shaking, we decided to have me walk in the front since I was smaller and not carrying a pack, and Josh take up the rear. I was going to look far ahead on the trail and continuously scan the terrain for those dreaded day-glo eyes. Josh was to the same, but from behind. We each held up a trekking pole, waved it above our heads and began to walk. We began by yelling, but soon opted to sing. We were worried that he would strike from the side or from behind so we attempted to make as much noise as possible. All of the songs had military-esque cadences to make them sound more aggressive and menacing and our first song repeated the mantra:

We don't like no mountain lions

We don't like no mountain lions

Mountain lions go home!

Mountain lions go home!

We had a long, five miles in front of us and we sang the whole way, voices creaking and cracking, poles waving from wilting arms, and feet stumbling over hidden rocks. I wished on the way down that we had not done the hike during that night, but mostly, that we weren't in mountain lion country. It was the first animal I had ever encountered, other than in the safety of a zoo and their prison-like barricades, that had possibly wanted to kill me. I loved and appreciated the bears in the Sierras so much more because they turned tail and ran like hell upon sighting a human. They just wanted my easy-access food. But the cat did not care about my trail mix. He was perusing me.

I can see now, looking back, that my hatred of the mountain lion and affection for the bears was egocentric. I loved the bears because they feared me. They did not threaten me. They may have been deemed in the class of "predators" but, for the most part, did not pose a threat to humans, other than as a nuisance. Grizzlies, at one time, were once natural occupants of California but had been pretty much eradicated by the settlers by the early twentieth century. They were too much of a threat, so they were destroyed. Black bears, on the other hand, were much more timid, and so they were largely left alone. So instead of loving black bears for being bears, I loved them for their timidity and skittishness. Mountain lions, on the other hand, I hated for being predators and seeing me as prey. My ideals of the heroic, under protected, and dwindling predators were shattered. I only wanted to protect the predator that had survived in California sheerly by merit of not displaying predator-like qualities.

The lion, I look back and contemplate, was beautiful, but it was a cold beauty. Those glowing eyes and lithe movement harkened back to exotic, enchanting courtesans in the days of the sultans. Vixens that you could not touch and when you looked at their eyes, really looked at them, beyond the faux eroticism, you saw a cool detachment. And it scared you because you knew that they did not play by your rules and that unpredictability made them dangerous.

We made it back to the car safely at about 2:30 in the morning, with a few years shaved off of our lives from the stone-cold, sustained fear. Without even stopping to use the pit toilets, we threw our things in the trunk, hopped in the car, and sped to the road, to people, and to civilization. The mountain lion's eyes bothered me in the car and continue to bother me today because they killed a little part of me. They killed that idealistic girl that holds up banners of slaughtered, maimed cows to fight the abuse of animals in the meat industry. And they killed that self-righteous girl who fights, and fights like a caged mongrel, because she knows that she is right since she bases her beliefs and passions on morals and facts. Those detached, glowing eyes showed me that there is a middle ground and that there is no such thing as being right or being wrong. There is only a state of being.

The best thing of all is that I spent all of this time contemplating the mountain lion and his mesmerizing eyes and what they mean for my environmental consciousness, but he never thinks of me. I have been forgotten. He goes about his mountain lion existence, living and surviving. And in a way, that is life at its most complex and most simple, and at its most beautiful and most barbaric; that is the summary of life. Kindness is not necessarily heroic and murder is not necessarily malicious. When I close my eyes as I'm falling asleep at night, sometimes he leads me to another world with his eyes. It's beautiful there. I want to stay.

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