

The Doe

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I was driving. It was early and the light was good. The end of the summer, and the drought broken. Days and days of drenching rain, then at last, a high blue sky and horse tail clouds like a dance up there. A steady, cool breeze stirred the air, and you could see every shining leaf on the trees. The grass, brown all summer, had gone green again, so that it felt confusing--spring or fall? was it coming or going, this season? was it a beginning or an end?

There was an excitement in the air. A whole clear day, free, my own. I was going over to the water for a paddle and I didn't want to miss the tide. I'd packed my lunch and lifted the sleek red kayak off the sawhorses out back, where the four of us who shared this old house divided into apartments store our things. I slid my boat into its cradles on top of the car then lashed it down and put my gear in the trunk. Then I drove out of town past the green where early morning walkers played with their dogs. I came to the blinking yellow warning light at the top of the hill near the entrance to Sunrise, where a beloved friend who's long since moved away once lived just beyond the one remaining farmhouse with the modest but beautifully plumb red barn beside it. Nearly all the farms are gone now. Just a few white clapboard houses with a stray barn or two to remind us what the land used to look like, windrows marking the edges of fields, quiet houses with

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useful barns close by. As I'm thinking this, missing my friend, I see that some cars have stopped moving, traffic is backing up. Now what, I wondered? A school bus already?

A red van had pulled to the side of the road coming up the hill towards me. A pickup, blue, was pulled over on my side going downhill. A few other cars had slowed, then threaded their way through something I couldn't see. A man loped across the road. He turned and looked back, nervous. He had gray hair. He was wiry, dressed in work clothes--a t-shirt, blue jeans, laced up boots. Before he got halfway, something else came out from behind his truck. It was a deer. A doe. And she didn't spring with their usual quickness, the ease and lightness that makes them vanish up a small rise, like the bank she ran toward, and disappear into the green thicket, the waiting woods. She rocked on three legs, dragging what looked like a split stick behind her. It kept banging on the road.

She tried for the bank, one step, two, then she gave way, and faster than I could draw a breath, she turned and lay down. She did not fall. Her legs gave way under her, yes, but she lowered herself, folded her good knees and laid her body down, just there, where the bank met the road, beside the white line. My car rolled slowly by her. The man stood a pace or two out and uphill from her, his arms out to his sides, his head whipping back and forth, looking for cars, as if to keep us all away. I drew over just past his pick up, my foot on the brake. I looked back, calling out, “Do you need help?” It happened so fast, how it came to me what was happening. She'd been hit. Her leg had snapped at the knee, hopelessly broken. The rest of her looked perfect, the beautiful curve of her soft belly, her sleek muscled flanks, her long neck, her coat that unmistakable color--cinnamon--was flawless. And her face. He gestured me away,

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impatient, as if I were intruding. When that was not at all my meaning. I could not leave. When I saw that the thing she dragged behind her was her own leg, I lurched forward too, and cried out. Tears sprang from me. I could not stop them. I had to pull over, I couldn't see any longer. I was crying so loud I could hear myself.

The police, he'd called the police. He kept making that gesture, as if he'd sweep me away with the sheer force of his arms.

She'd turned at the sound of my voice. She looked straight at me and held my gaze.

For an unsteady second, I thought she'd be okay--it was just her leg--she wasn't hurt anywhere else. But when she turned to see me, her face so intelligent and calm, there was a long spool of bloody mucous hanging from her jaw.

She made no sound. She did not cry out. No whine, no groan, not like the baby's cry of a rabbit torn by the owl who used to hunt at night near my house when I lived alone in the middle of the woods. She did not struggle at all, but let herself sink down, her head high, her ears upright, alert, turning ever so slowly toward me that lovely strong neck, so that I saw the white at her throat, the delicate lining of her erect ears, and the dark shine of her nose. And those eyes.

Once, when my life had been turned inside out and I felt hollowed out, like a Halloween pumpkin, like a gourd set out to dry in the sun so that later you could shake it to hear its dried up seeds rattle, earth music, I opened the beautiful French doors to our half built house in the woods and lowered myself down the roughed out steps. One day a real staircase into a courtyard was to have been built--there was going to be a wall made

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of large gray stones gathered from the New England forest that seemed to manufacture them. It would enclose a tall straight ash, a rock pool fed by the stream, and roses. And there would be children playing on the grass. I sat there, knowing I would never see any of this come to be, listening to the wind stir the tops of the trees that towered over the house, as if I sat at the bottom of a green sunlit sea and could breath there.

I was alone. I was transported back to a moment when, at four, I first heard a plane fly low overhead as I dangled over the swing my father had hung from an old tree, dragging my hands and feet in the dirt, making patterns in the dust, dreaming. I heard it in my belly. I made this discovery. That a sound far up could pull at my innards as if they were attached by a string, and stir something in me, like a dust devil. I felt emptied out, my ears hurting from the echo of space that opened, suddenly, into a vastness unimaginable a moment before. Looking down, I discovered up, far up. Where God is and I am not.

I was still for a long time, feeling the intermittent warmth of the sun. All at once I shivered. Something drew my eyes to the right. I found myself staring into a thicket beneath a tall, smooth-barked ash. I saw nothing. Then she moved. Just a lowering and raising of her head. A young doe, her eyes fixed on me. Calmly, she lay there, resting. Staring. Watching. I started. She didn't. I blinked, confused. I felt her intelligence, a near presence--how to say it?--a warm, embodied being nearby, benevolent, sensing my sorrow. I was bereft. Like a raft, floating. She was quite still, at home here, on my land, comfortable. And she held that stare, not moving, unafraid, staring for so long that I forgot I was looking back, and drank her in, her gaze, her kindness. And could feel her

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warmth, her breath, even. The power of her simple presence, it filled me. It was her calm I felt well up in me, teaching me to look for my own.

My first and only child had died in my womb, I'd watched, splayed open on a cold examination table at midnight, having been brought to the hospital through a snow storm, plucked from a traffic jam behind an accident by an extra ambulance. My husband followed, numbly, in our car, his face, I imagined, lit up by the red blinking light, his ears hurt by the wailing of the siren. My husband's head sank to his folded arms beside me as the winking light of our baby's newly formed heart went out, his lifeline crushed by a blood-drenched wad of tumor. Weeks later I held a thimble full of ashes, pastel sea wrack, in my palm. We buried it under a small tree at the foot of the path to our new house in the woods. Earlier that year I had sat beside my brother Merrell as he turned a gorgeous translucent blue green, like seawater in a tidal pool, his chest heaving as he struggled for his last breaths. I have never seen anyone work so hard. Sensing that he could not let go while she was there, I took my mother out for a cup of soup. We sat by a window overlooking the Navesink River and I knew I was keeping her from her dying son's bed side. But I also knew he was exhausted and needed permission to leave us. When we returned, the house was empty except for my father, ashen faced, who said Sue, my brother's wife, had taken the kids to a friend's, that Merrell had died. I saw her body register the shock. "He died while I was gone?" My mother walked to the bed we'd set up for him in the den, the room now quiet, the oxygen turned off, the tubes taken from his nose. His skin had turned the color of beeswax. He looked like a martyred saint. He looked like Jesus in images from the Passion. "He's still warm," she

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said, her hand tight on his skeletal ankle under the light covers. The curve of her back, the tilt of her head, her hesitance as she leaned down over his quiet body whose birth nearly split her in two, a tiny woman delivering a twelve pound blue baby midway through the war--we still have my father's anxious telegrams home from Munich--this shy approach as she lifted her hand to touch his face, it lifted her through time and error. This taught me what it means to be shriven.

My brother's was the first in that year of deaths that unmade a whole world. A day short of a year later my father-in-law died. He'd never been in a hospital bed until they removed his colon. Like my brother, he died at home. We'd sat on Dock's bed as he threw off his covers and made to get up. "It's time to go. Come on, Michael, let's get ready." "Where are we going, Daddy?" my husband asked, wanting to cover his father's nakedness, the virile body shrunken now, his loins swaddled in a diaper. "Let's go home now," Dock said, struggling to sit up again. My husband soothed him. "Why don't we stay here, Daddy. We are home." A few months earlier Anna, my mother-in-law, had gotten up one morning and said she had a headache and then went back to bed and never woke. It was clear that he was dying and she did not want to live without him. Soon after, her only remaining sister, Irene, died in her sleep in the old family house in Boston, her clean white US Keds beside her bed. I envied her that simplicity. You stand at the edge of that many graves one right after another and you begin to wonder. You feel the earth give under your feet, feel yourself falling headlong into darkness. Too much death and a man and a woman might no longer recognize each other, turning in the night--whose moonlit body?--barely knowing themselves.

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Before I cleaned the house, swept my footprints from the stoop, stood the broom in a corner and called my ex-husband to say the key would be waiting for him under the mat, I had gone out the lovely French doors to sit one last time, remembering the look of his strong back, how sweat made his black hair curl as he'd hammered each nail. How once, when we were making love, I studied his muscled shoulder, the pattern of freckles there, and thought, wrongly, “No one else will ever see and love this man's body as I have.” It was about this time of year.

So when this doe on the familiar road turned and I saw that string of spittle mixed with blood and knew her guts were hurt, that she was so broken she would never heal, but must surely die, I wept, my chest in spasms of helpless loss. So softly, she looked back at me, ready, knowing.

He was angry now, the man who had hit her, the man who had called the police, who still were not coming. He did not know that she did not need them. He was whipping those arms to one side. He so wanted me to keep moving.

I wanted to go to her. Stop my car, get out, and just walk across the road, with its neatly painted dividing line, and meet her gaze as she watched me approach. I would have walked quietly. I would have made sure I spoke low to her, “It's all right, I won't hurt you. It's okay,” I would have said.

And then I would just sit down beside her, at her head. I would slowly reach out my hand, watching her kind intelligent eyes, letting her take me in with them, and lay my hand on her head, then her neck, let her head rest on my soft thigh, and I would feel her warmth--the blood still moving through her, keeping her alive for a while longer. I

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would run one loving hand down her great vaulted ribcage and over her soft vulnerable belly, no weight where she was so invisibly wounded, just so she could feel a gentle touch, some company, while what had been broken open inside her worked its way through her.

I could hear the crack, kept hearing it over and over, of that sleekly crafted limb, no spare flesh, nothing to spare at all, so that it snapped cleanly, and had hung there, light--as if it would burn with a hot clear flame, were it kindling. It was so hard that she could not be left in peace, in the woods, with her own kind, to die, but had to die among strangers.

I did not stop, though, but drove slowly by her, my head turned back until it was impossible not to look where I was going, hating what I thought must surely be coming to her.

How does a deer die? Where does a wounded animal go to lie down, to find peace, and wait, patient with its suffering, neither struggling nor crying out, just resting there for a time, then lying all the way down, stretching out, its head to the earth, and just breathing, its eyes wide open?

Would another deer come and nuzzle her? How many would come? Which of them would wait for her, and, missing her, linger where they grazed a while longer before turning back, deep, deeper into the woods, accepting that she would come no longer. How do the deer comfort one another for having to live near us?

I drove the rest of the way unseeing.

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Hours later, out on the water in my boat, paddling for the sunsparkle on the windswept surface of the water, I felt her with me. Later, resting on the sand, half sleeping, she kept coming to me. Her eyes, her head swiveling so calmly toward me, her silence.

I wonder, could she teach me how to die? Could she teach me to struggle less, but also to try for the bank, the green tangle of wildflowers and bramble, the asters and chicory, the wild carrots and Black-Eyed Susans, the Joe Pye and leafed out maples and oaks. Could she teach me to bear it, and try for the woods, the green place, the quiet solitude to be with whatever came to me, inevitable, accidentally but irrevocably mine?

I can smell her. I can feel her warm coat, the arch of her side as she breathed, her bony head on my thigh, the blood and spittle wetting my skin as I stroked her so quietly and leaned my own head down to her, to let her hear a loving voice, a tender word, in a strange unknowable language uttered into her wide open ear.

This, the harsh practice, letting go.

Later, when I pass on my way home, I look fast--nothing there, I think, but then I see it--the dark stain on the side of the road. The only sign that a life stopped there. A meeting of strangers. Who among us could bear so anonymous a death? So separate from anyone who knows us, loves us, calls us by our familiar name, and would stay with us, touching us till we could not feel them with us any longer? Who would not want to lie down with their dying, and feel the last warmth their flesh would ever hold? Who would not want to reach out and stroke their hair, their face, touch hands, touch heart,

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touch feet, telling them every little thing we could think of, telling them nothing, looking for all we're worth, meeting their gaze?

I would like to learn how to die now, before it's too late. Since seeing her, since she left her mark on me, I have been practicing. And I know it for a fact, I am not ready to lay it down. Not now, not yet. Still I practice. And when it's my turn, may I lie down with her dignity, her uncomplaining gaze, her knowing what she was and just where, and waiting--not for anyone to do something--but for what she felt deep inside her, in the snapped stick of leg bent double under her, all pain gaining her attention now. What she knew, as an animal knows, about dying.

She is still with me. My helpmate. My guide. Moving me into words. It's all I can think to do with my mute and helpless love. Tender lovely stranger, broken open doe.