Snakes

Description

The AutoEthnographer

Men and Rattlesnakes in the Woods

Authorâ??s Memo

This piece of original short fiction contains plot elements based on my recent adventures hiking remote trails in Colorado. Those experiences inform the descriptions of plants, animals, and terrain in the selection. The character of the narrator, a woman who hikes alone, is largely fictionalized. Nameless, she shares my past as a rape victim as well as my recent ordeals of being stalked on a remote mountain trail and having to finesse my way past a rattlesnake.

While being stalked in the woods, the narrator considers the recent (nonfictional) news about female assault victims being charged with false reporting, leaving the reader to later wonder whether she bothered to report her stalker, and convincing the astute reader that she herself is a rape survivor and she grieves for women, herself among them, who have been victims of sexual assault. She vows to go down swinging if he comes at her, ill-prepared for defense as she is.

The description of her is incomplete, with the aim of prodding readers to consider unorthodox female adventurers with more curiosity and less negative judgment.

The post-lude to the story shifts from past to present tense, with the narrator continuing her adventures in the mountains, this time encountering an actual snake. In contrast to the sinister nude male plaguing her in the mountains, she seeks to evade the venomous diamondback, which she does through passive defense with her backpack. This snake poses more of an existential threat to the narrator, but feels

benign compared to the unresolved motives of the stalker she encountered four days earlier. The continuation of her journey through the woods concludes a triggering narrative with a hopeful segue.

trail
trail
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She was tough, in ways that didnâ??t always make her popular, but gave her the strength to enjoy things most people feared doing. She attributed her ability to stave off panic to years of solo backpacking. At work, she could deescalate conflicts between meth-frenzied unfortunates. In board rooms and court rooms she could sit patiently, accused of sins she hadnâ??t committed, until at last, evidence exonerated her. Callouses developed on her psyche that enabled her to endure insult, but also left her less capable of empathizing with those weaker or more outwardly sensitive.

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Therefore, the guy in the woods was more of a problem than the plot details might suggest. She spotted his completely bare, Caucasian fanny bouncing away from her in the woods, in an area of the montane wilderness that had been ravaged by fire less than two years ago. He was running down the trail, hands invisible, likely holding his Merrills and socks and tidy whiteys, his patriotic t-shirt and cargo pants, although this was a guess because she never saw what he carried (or fondled). Once she spotted him, she froze and counted slowly to sixty to give him a good head start. Sheâ??d cornered his type before, and knew that they were dangerous when threatened. She supposed that if he were smart, heâ??d descend rapidly, get to his car, and drive off before he could be tracked or confronted.

Predictably, naked guy wasnâ??t that smart. She tracked his footprints on the damp trail for a few hundred feet, and then realized that heâ??d crept off into the woods, probably in one of the areas where trees untouched by the fire crowded the trail. Then she understood a far less desirable option: he was watching her.

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She took quick inventory of her resources. She was carrying two walking sticks, but they were high-tech, lightweight ones with rubber tips. Even with the soft bits, they would hurt if jabbed with precise aim into his face or genitals. Although she didnâ??t trust her ability, he wouldnâ??t know that, and she might be able to talk some sense into him while holding him off. She didnâ??t carry the pepper spray that she had vowed, then failed, to buy at the Army surplus store.

Her trail runners lacked the substance of the stiff leather hiking boots she left behind, not even enough to support a sharp kick to the midsection. She might trick him into thinking that her Garmin satellite watch had a transmitter, but any fool should know that there was no connectivity between hikers and the outside world up here. Her best weapon was to stay calm because naked guy seemed prone to bad decisions and panic.

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Her head swiveled as she moved down the trail, senses engaged to avoid an ambush. In the worst possible case scenario, naked guy had military training and would stalk her, then remove evidence of whatever it was he felt ashamed about. But anyone with real skills would easily be able to get lost in these mountains, following game trails rather than marked and mapped routes, undetected to privately commit whatever perverse acts he felt like doing. Military seemed less likely, the more she thought about it.

So what was this idiotâ??s motivation, either for hiking nude, or running away when busted? Being naked on federal land by itself isnâ??t a crime. Charges are only considered if nudists display lewd or threatening behavior, and then, she knew, only if reported to authorities such as federal law enforcement or sheriffâ??s offices. And nudity will not be prosecuted as a crime if the people taking the report canâ??t stop giggling and rolling their eyes about streakers running around in the woods scaring little old ladies.

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She thought she caught sight of him a couple of times, a slight movement in the middle distance, a spruce bough moving against the breeze. The half-charred woods, so recently sterilized, were quiet except where the creek added notes to the sound of the wind. Few western jays darted among branches, and no larger game was obvious except for mule deer whose deep tracks crossed the maintained trail.

The memory of a recent podcast imposed on her concentration. The report quantified the high incidence of sexual assault victims recanting and being charged with false allegations under pressure from effective but overzealous interrogators. Hearing their stories, she grieved for those women and also for her younger self, who always knew better than to complain about the assholes. The victims who renounced and were charged themselves were all women under the age of 26. Add 10 years or reverse those digits, and youâ??ve got a brittle old bitch who cannot be manipulated by cops. Now, finally, data demonstrated as much.

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Regaining vigilant, she knew she was nearing the trailhead, where her car had been one of only three when she arrived. Sheâ??d noted the two parked Toyotas that morning. Naked guyâ??s vehicle would be in that lot unless he managed to short cut the trail, hop into his ride, and speed off down the pass in either direction. If heâ??d asked for advice, she would have recommended that he go west, where no major towns existed for over a hundred miles, but most traffic came from the east, where a college town in the valley floor sprawled out comfortably. The appeal of town wasnâ??t something sheâ??d felt much lately, but the safety in numbers was palpable now. Other than the possibility of the Toyota owners making a timely appearance, her best hope was to reach her car or to hail a passerby if he tried to stop her.

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She recognized the most dangerous point of what had turned out to be a freak show of a hike. If naked guy worked himself up into a panic, he would stop her from embarrassing him by any means necessary. Only one steep, zig-zagging, rocky stretch of trail separated her from safety, offering plenty of hiding places for him among the stout spruce trunks at this lower elevation. She tried to convince herself that his dimpled, jiggling ass meant that he probably couldnâ??t bushwhack competently enough to surprise her without hurting himself or alerting her to his arrival. If he did attack, sheâ??d fight him with an accumulated lifetime of rage from being told how to talk, act, and think. His sense of superiority would give him more confidence than he deserved, and her finely tuned self-preservation reflex would make her more dangerous than he would expect.

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Four days later, she navigates a different and more remote trail, where the sun bakes rocks for snakes and lizards to bask among the wildflowers. She is startled by a faint, staccato ticking.

The snake coils with its head arched in the clichÃ© of an imminent strike, rattle sizzling with anticipation. She almost laughs at the excessive visual outburst, especially because the sound is so modest. Her next impulse is to grab her camera and get a shot of the show-off. But the final, more rational response leads her to reverse direction and give drama snake the space it needs to calm down. Once she backs off, it retreats to a saxifrage, where she notices hundreds of blooming flowers, each magically composed of five perfect pink heart-shaped petals surrounding a golden yellow center. She reaches for her cell phone, flicks two fingers on the screen to magnify the snake, and hopes that the camera captures the diamond pattern repeated along its impressive length.

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Drama snake and the woman maintain a standoff for minutes that start to feel like hours. She scoops up and tosses some crumbly granitic scree, but the snake holds its pose on the saxifrage, winding up into its leaves and branches, its tail, now relaxed, limp against the gravel. She pitches a golf-ball sized stone into the upper stems of the rose bush, not to hit the snake, but to see if it is still in strike mode. The snake refuses to move, allowing her too little room to pass it safely on the trail. She reckons that it

senses safety, as if undetected in the bush, which may have been the case had it not already created such a ruckus. She considers how often our defenses backfire, and how lucky drama snake is to have encountered perhaps the only hiker on this trail not carrying a gun.

Soon, she continues down the trail, dangling her backpack as a decoy between exposed ankles and eager fangs. She reaches the junction, and instead of heading south for the parking lot, turns upvalley and heads northward, back into the forest.

Credits

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