Hear Him Roar
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Running with the deer. This is what she called it, because her dark hour was their hour also. They spent their days bedded down along the river. They would come up into the neighborhood after midnight to feed on lawns, shrubs, unfenced gardens. Each night they traveled great distances, eating every green, tender thing they could find. Before dawn they would turn toward the river again, gliding through the neighborhood like a host of spirits, dissolving back into the brush. She was the only one on the block who didn’t mind their ravenous eating. She understood that they were in trouble, multiplying as fast as the tracts and malls that were devouring their habitat and funneling them into the narrow greenbelt along the river. She understood that they were a public menace, not just for the yards they pillaged but also for the cars they wrecked, the arms and legs and skulls that cracked when people plowed into them on the roads. Every day at the insurance company she processed the claims, she heard her bosses moan about the deer, the money they were costing.

She was a good employee, reliable, efficient, smart—too smart to challenge her bosses on the matter of the deer. Anyway her understanding with the deer was secret, never acknowledged openly to anyone but her boyfriend. She knew them. They knew her. She told him they ran with her, not away from her, and he believed it. She told him it wasn’t discipline that got her up and out an hour before dawn each day. She told him it was greed. For quiet. For unrestricted movement. For the sliver of each day that didn’t belong to anyone. Having that sliver helped her share the rest—with her kids, her bosses, him.

The reporters asked if it had made him uncomfortable, her going off into the dark like that, alone. When he said of course,
they thought he meant *Of course, I feared for her safety.* Because her safety is what they were asking about. But maybe he meant something else, or something more. Maybe he was talking about the way she would remove herself from his heavy, sleepy grasp and slip away into the darkness, going off to seek something she didn’t find with him, leaving the bed as eagerly as she’d entered it five hours before.

He was glad she told him about the deer. Somehow this made it easier to have her leave his bed. He didn’t tell the reporters that, but he did tell them he took her seriously the two days before it happened, when she said something was different out there, something she couldn’t put her finger on, a feeling down by the river, an uneasiness she sensed in the deer, in herself. If she had been superstitious, she’d told him, she would have thought it was a ghost.

That had to be what she thought at the moment of the attack. What else could she have thought? Did she think it was a person? No, people make noise. She would have heard a human attacker coming. She was well into her run by then, a good three miles upriver from her home, and deep into the runner’s trance. The muscles and the tendons all loose and warm. Heart pumping strong and steady, lungs feeling free. Eyes adjusted to the darkness, which was barely beginning to thin. By now she was getting what she came here for, the thing that always lured her back, the opening of pores, of glands, of emotions, the honing of senses that was also a kind of opening, a dissolving of boundaries, a blending with the darkness no one owns. Running with the deer, sharing this shadowy element that their presence defined for her. So of course she sensed it, as the deer did, or because they did. Something different, a presence faint but definite, like a word on the tip of the tongue, a sound on the very edge of human hearing, vague, so subtle as to be almost nothing, and for all this exciting, stimulating, and never more elusive than in the instant before it struck.

It came from her right side, from far enough behind that she never saw it. The blow was so fierce that she didn’t touch ground
again until she hit a spot twenty feet down the sloped embankment to the left of the trail. The force carried her another twelve feet down the slope, and her too-zealous attacker ended up seven feet beyond her. The hard landing broke her left arm.

When the attack resumed she raised both hands and both knees and began to fight. For her children, not herself. Because she knew she was dead. Almost immediately, long before she quit fighting, she accepted that. She had been selected. She had been watched. And now she had been struck by a killer so skilled, so discreet that in the seconds before it hit her she had imagined it was far away. The fighting was awful—vicious, bloody, long. She fought for the children, so they would know she fought. But she didn’t mind dying this death. He would understand this. Maybe that was why she’d let this one move in with her. She had chosen to run with the deer. And now, as the sky brightened beyond the canopy of branches, like a deer she dissolved.