

Two Girls in the Modoc

I finally fell asleep in my tent after a torturous hour with my tired legs twitching in restless spasms, my mind reacting to every small noise in the dark after hearing the news that a cougar was spotted roaming around the area the day before.

I'd spent most of the day meandering in the hot late summer sun through the grass and sagebrush of Modoc land in northern California, searching for a vision quest place, one with a never-ending uninterrupted view, far away from other people and out of earshot. I remembered the comment from our questing guide that morning, "Be alert on your solo time, a cougar was spotted walking along the south ridge yesterday. I'm not trying to scare you, just reminding you to be aware of what's going on around you." I wondered how far from base camp it would be safe to go and be alone for three days and nights.

Mid-afternoon I found a perfect campsite in a five-acre meadow with open vistas of tree-dotted plateaus layered across the land as far as I could see, and an endless cadmium blue sky. The perfection of the place was its simplicity, nothing between me and the view across the sloping hills except for an occasional tree, which would bring the birds with their early morning and late evening songs announcing the beginning and end of each day.

I walked the half mile and back across the chaparral from basecamp to my chosen site three times over and through the biscuit root and buckwheat, carrying gear under my arms and in handfuls to haul everything out: tent, sleeping bag, clothing sack, equipment bag, art supply tote, and three gallon bottles of water. I stopped half way out each time in the shade of a pinion pine tree and put everything down, sat on a rock, took a long drink from my water bottle and gave my arms a rest.

Once my cache of supplies was hauled out, I pulled tent poles and a bundle of orange nylon from the stuff bag, read the directions, and pitched my new tent next to an old-growth juniper tree laden with aromatic purple berries. Weather reports predicted rain the next day which is why I brought the tent, but I left the rainfly off that first night to expose the sheer mesh window that stretched across the whole top of the tent, aptly called The Stargazer because, without the rainfly, there was nothing between the camper and the stars except a thin screen-like mesh.

By the end of the day, I was beyond exhausted. When I laid my head down on my small camp pillow, the view did not disappoint. Stars appeared in the night sky, one after another. By the time my jumpy legs and nervous mind had worked themselves out and into relaxation, the stars seduced me like twinkly sirens through the doorway of sleep.

It was sometime after darkness had crept in and swallowed the sky that I dreamed I smelled a barnyard and heard the hollow thumping sounds of hooves against solid ground. A low pitched guttural snort brought me out of my sopor. My first thought was *it's the cougar*. I rolled out of the barnyard dream and onto my back, perked up my ears, and picked up the wafting bucolic stink of range animals. Then, the familiar sound of exhaled air fluttering against loose lips. *Horses? Really? Out in the middle of the Modoc, and nothing to keep me from being stomped to death but the flimsy walls of a nylon tent?* My heart kicked into overdrive, a get-ready-to-run message bull-horned inside my head.

Childhood experiences with horses had left both the horse and me nervous and pulling back in a panic. When I was ten, we went on a trail ride during a family vacation. The horse I rode on, sensing I wasn't in control, brushed against tree trunks and limbs along the well-worn

trail, trying to force me off. I remember the tearful relief I felt when the ride was finally over. That experience, combined with an episode of nearly getting kicked by a horse a few years earlier (my older sister pulled me out of the way at the last minute), had brought me to the conclusion that horses are not to be trusted. I was afraid of horses.

The sound of hooves, more than four, moved in closer. I laid there, suspended in time. They appeared like two gothic intruders towering over me, looking through the window. I froze. My back stiffened, elbows and heels pressed deep into the air mattress ready for whatever might happen next. Long oval shapes with pointed ears looked down at me; the stars sprinkled the night sky around their heads like a silent audience. I imagined looking down at the scene from the heavens, two massive creatures peering over the top of a small round orange-glow camping tent in an open field. One shook its head briskly for a few seconds without any sound – a gesture of friendliness or threat, or to clear away mosquitoes. I didn't know which, couldn't read the movement, knowing little about horses. Anyway, I didn't care about why I just wanted them to leave.

I groped around in the small hanging pocket in the side of the tent, fumbled for my flashlight, turned it on and shone it at thing one and thing two. The light revealed how close the horses were, almost within reach. Their eyes glowed greenish-white, surrounded by fringed eyelashes against rich coffee brown faces and tree trunk necks. I unzipped my bag and sat up. "Shoo – shoo!" I yelled, clapping my hands loudly. "Go away!" They stayed put. "Go, go!" I tried again, this time with more animation in my clapping. I thought horses were easily spooked, but not these two. It seemed to perk their interest, one nuzzled at a gear bag I'd left on the ground at the edge of the tent, then raised up bumping juniper limbs and releasing a rain of berries

that tapped against the top and sides of the thinly walled tent like a hail storm. My arms shot up over my head to shield my face, another burst of escape hormones flooded my body.

I weighed my options: *get up and try to chase them away?* My body responded with an immediate *No!* I didn't think I could make myself leave the false sense of security I felt cuddled inside my sleeping bag, behind the wall of nylon. *Would anyone hear if I called for help? What would I yell: "Help, two horses are looking at me?"* I put my hands over my face, breathed in and out against my fingers. The reason I went on vision quests was to find the courage to face my fears and clear away obstacles that kept me from living with an open heart. Here was a chance to confront fear head-on. I'd thought about what to do if I saw a cougar – don't run, raise your arms and make yourself look big and dangerous, hold eye contact – but I never expected horses to sneak up on me. There's no collective wisdom about how to protect yourself from being stalked by horses.

I took my hands away, and the black shapes stood side by side above me like disquieting sentinels, as if they were waiting for something. I saw the outline of their powerful muscular necks against the night sky, heard their snorts and sniffs, and smelled the sweat, hair, and manure. I laid back down on my back, hoping they'd lose interest and wander off.

Then, something shifted in me and I made a conscious decision not to fight my fear, not to resist the feeling. I closed my eyes and focused on the hard knot in my gut, put my attention there, breathed into it. I said, *"What's the real reason for this fear? Am I really in danger right now?"* The focus of attention seemed to untie the knot and release the tension. Within minutes my heart rate slowed, almost back to normal. I felt my body loosen and cave into the soft mattress. The muscles of my face and jaw let go of their hold.

I moved my pillow around so I could see them more easily, brought my arms up and clasped my hands behind my neck, settled in for the duration, to watch them watching me. One of the horses shifted feet, and a shiver rolled down its head and neck. The rippling of horse hair caused a reaction in me, in the same way a yawn is contagious, and a chill raised the hair on my neck and arms. I had a recognition that somewhere in the middle of that massive equine flesh, bone and sinew beat a heart as big as my head. They showed no aggression, gave me no real reason to fear them. Two tilted heads with their ears perked up in a playful like gesture. They seemed contented to be there, like allies, great lurking angels, or messengers.

A quote from the world's oldest oracle, *The I Ching, Chinese Book of Changes*, came to me, oozed out from somewhere in the dark of my gray matter: "*Hexagram #2: Relaxing, Flowing, Responsive: The unmoving mover of it all sits in the center, docile as a mare.*" I had selected this hexagram several times over the years after randomly drawing six marbles of various colors from a small velvet bag and reading the hexagram using the sequence and color of the chosen marbles. The odds of choosing the same hexagram more than once are something like ten thousand to one – Hexagram #2 with the message of docile mares doing nothing and being everything. I concluded my visitors were two mares, and named them "The Girls."

"Girls," I said, "You've won me over. I'm fine if you want to hang out here for a while. Just please don't step on me."

We remained there for a time – I don't know how long – The Girls and me, watching and waiting.

Sleep came between one second of equine silhouettes and stars and another second of unconsciousness. When I awoke at ten o'clock, they were still there. I laughed out loud to see them looking down at me. "You Girls are relentless," I said, rolled over and went back to sleep. At midnight I heard them close by ripping up grasses and munching in rhythmic unison. I was comforted by their presence and safe knowing they were there. They wouldn't linger if a cougar was anywhere close by.

At two o'clock, when I got up to pee, they were gone. I could smell the muck of digested grass and hay left behind in a pile somewhere nearby, a smell that would later bring back the vivid memory of The Girls in the Modoc.

I chose my steps carefully back to my tent, crawled into the warm sleeping bag, and laid there in a melancholy longing for my nighttime companions. I fell back to sleep planning how I'd savor and capture those intuitive ears on the drawing pad – my way of bowing in gratitude for two visitors that helped me look down through the window of my own fear.