

# Damaged Beauties

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On my route to work, there is a section of highway that is not for sissies. It is one of those dangerously complex sections of road where you had better know what you are doing before you get there, or stay out of the way of those who do. Twin lanes of traffic speed from a rural collector highway onto the interstate. The road does this sort of mid-air right angle, while dropping 50 feet in the space of about 300. Then it dumps you onto the interstate below. There is no messing around. I drive it every morning, usually only half-conscious of where I am, and assuming that I am safe.

One morning about a year ago, as I approached this stretch, my sedate drive was suddenly disturbed by scores of alarming red brake lights. Up ahead, at the crest of the hill, drivers slammed on their brakes as cars slid and swerved urgently. No cause was visible.

Then, as I got closer, I saw her.

A female deer with crushed hindquarters was positioned on the left shoulder. Her mouth was open, like a barking dog's. She had been hit and she was suffering beyond anything I thought I had ever seen. She was stumbling around, into oncoming traffic, searching for an escape, her rear dragging the ground. Cars veered around her. Nobody wanted to be the one to finish her off. She dragged herself off the road and back to the shoulder, next to the cement guardrail. I watched with one hand over my mouth, my stomach and soul retching, as she lifted her front feet up on the three-foot cement barrier. "No," I breathed, bracing myself against the seat. She would have plunged 50 feet straight down, onto another highway below. I watched with sickened relief as her legs failed and she went down on one side. Panicking, she hurried to right herself, mouth still open. Was she screaming? Her glossy eyes were scanning everything, searching for options, begging for some release.

A police van was parked along the right shoulder of the highway, leading me to believe she had been there more than just a few minutes. The horrified officer was sort of pacing back and forth along the verge, unable to enter traffic without causing an accident, unable to reach the damaged creature. I am sure he intended to shoot her, but he couldn't reach her. He couldn't help her live, and he couldn't help her die. I rounded the corner and lost sight of both of them.

I have never seen a deer with her mouth open before . . . except, that is, for those that swung from the rafters of our barn each winter. It was against the law to shoot does in Michigan. That was for cowards and cheats. My dad did it, though. I saw plenty of gutted beauties, seasoning in our barn before going to some butcher who would keep his mouth shut for a share of the meat. I was afraid of the dark, and afraid of the horrors of death; but every night, before my mom got rid of him, my dad would send me out into the blackness, into the barn I dreaded, to fetch hay for the pony I shared with my sister. What a life of privilege I led—a pony to ride! When I told the other kids at school about my pony, I always left out the part about dancing around the hanging doe to get his hay. It was a price too great for a pony we rode only rarely, and even then under the control of a guide rope. There were no wild, windblown-girl-on-her-horse scenes at my house. That horse took me nowhere.

Since the morning of the doe, I have worked in my mind to imagine some way that it might not have happened. Maybe if there were tall, angled mesh fencing on both sides of the road, she would have been protected. I fantasize about entering Congress to propose such a measure, and tell my compelling story. “She should have been protected!” I would declare. “It wasn’t her fault.” They would laugh at me and refuse. Who would spend money on that? How naive. “Let’s save the animals! Save the whales! Blah, blah, blah.”

In our ceaseless push toward whatever, it must have been agreed that people are the most important creatures on the planet. Our goals are primary. If some dumb animal happens to accidentally wander onto one of our roads, well then, that really is too bad. We just cannot afford to protect them, you see. What we need are more prisons. We must protect the wicked, not the weak.

I know that some people think I’m crazy. I know that I am overcome by a clawing need to protect these innocent creatures. Once, when I lived in Charleston, I tried to save a small white dog that was trapped on the grassy median of a fast-moving highway, where some coward had dumped her. The dog looked old, and appeared to be scrounging for food. I was only twenty. I refused to let happen to this animal what I knew would happen if I left her there. After three miles of arguing with myself about whether or not to go back for her—what if she was smashed by the time I got back there?—I did the right thing. I took the very next exit and flew to her rescue. I saw her ahead, and thanked God she was still alive. I yanked my Grand Am onto the grassy median, doing sixty-five. Quite a ride, let me tell you. I jumped out, and was immediately overwhelmed by the noise and smell of four lanes of traffic. It scared me. I began to shake, but

walked slowly back toward the dog. She froze and looked up at me with fear. I slowly moved closer, holding out my hand and cooing.

She bolted. That dog was more afraid of me than of all those murderous cars. She turned and ran like hell down the interstate. As I stood up, dumbfounded, I became aware of how insane I must look to all the people gaping at me from their cars. I scared myself. Where did the seizing, obsessive need to protect come from? I had just risked my neck for a dog that did not even want to be rescued.

I don't know what ever happened to that deer, and she haunts me. Almost every day when I pass the spot, I feel it—the same near-vomiting panic I felt that morning. Her beauty and her pain compel me back to the feeling. She was innocent and absolutely pure and horrified and female. Is it her suffering that haunts me? Is it her eyes? Do I know that look?

I realize that I do. I have lived this scene before. The eyes darting back and forth, surveying the horrific scene with simple survival in mind. It was the look in my sister's eyes whenever my father came at her. The confusion of the victim, the silent screams. Not knowing which way to go. If she stays where she is, she knows what will happen; she will be right back in the path of fast-moving traffic, and she will be hit again. If she attempts to escape, she will fall over the cliff. Which way should she go? Her eyes search me for answers but I cannot help her. I do not try. For I know that if I try, I, too, will be slammed by the vehicle that mangled her. My sister was weak, simple-minded, unable to understand the force coming at her. She operated on a level of sweetness, purity and survival. Too much like the damaged beauty on the highway. The deer is my guilt, and she haunts me.

I could do nothing either time. That established, I feel no better.

I realize that my obsession is compelling me to atone for my past weakness and helplessness. I am trying. I am not small anymore. My sister and I are both grown. My dad is dead, and we are safely out of his reach. Whenever I see that look, the one shared by those two broken females, I am still horrified, but I am not immobilized. I may always be haunted, but I will never again be still.