

HILARY BAKER

Felix Chevrolet, 2020
Acrylic on linen, 24 x 24 in.



COURTESY THE ARTIST

TERESA H. JANSSEN

Predation

Hiking and preying
in the wilderness

It was late afternoon when we had our encounter. Whacking our way through a dense growth of devil's club and slide alder over a slope of scree, I heard branches crash behind me. Whatever it was, it was moving fast and would soon be upon us. I braced for the confrontation.

It was August in the Skokomish watershed of Olympic National Park. My husband and I had begun walking the trail that morning through a lowland forest of Doug fir, cedar, and fern. We'd passed several hikers on their way out—two septuagenarians looking like old Scouts in their matching khaki shorts, shirts, and kerchiefs; a trail runner who swished past, earbuds in place, deaf to our greeting; a spry couple in their sixties; several solo trekkers; and three teens, scruffy after a few days in, but still enthusiastic. All males, but for one.

The ferns petered out and so did the people. Soon we were alone. The terrain became drier and rockier as we climbed switchbacks up a ridge, crossed a pass, and descended another valley—deeper into the range. In the early afternoon, we reached an open meadow where lupine bloomed among boulders strewn over the mountainside, as if thrown by a giant in a temper tantrum. Climbing past the granite slide, I heard a marmot's shrill whistle. We were at about 4,500 feet in elevation, the lower range of marmot country.

A high whistle answered. Above the trail, twenty yards away, we spotted the white-muzzled rodent lying on an outcrop, sunning itself. We stopped to admire its light-brown fur with patches of white, its stocky build (about the size of a large cat), broad forehead, and long bushy tail. It spied us, raised its head, trilled a warning to the colony, and scampered into its burrow. We took off our packs and waited on the trail, hoping the marmot would reappear.

When I was a kid, I frequently visited Hurricane Ridge in this national park, a few hours from my home, where marmots were as common as squirrels in a city park. Highly social, they entertained us as they played outside their burrows, foraged, and groomed each other. Tourists used to feed them. The marmots, or whistle pigs, as some call them, became so used to humans they rarely trilled, and perhaps that was a factor in their disappearance. I hadn't seen one on the ridge since my youth.

The critter's patience outlasted ours. We continued up the mountain.

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When we stopped for sandwiches, I took in the astringent smell of lichen and scrub fir and the faint perfume of heather. I had wanted to get into the mountains all summer. I looked at the Olympic Range nearly every day on my drive to town or above the treetops from the kids' school. Sometimes between errands or on the way home from work, I had to overcome a desire to veer west into the hills. Sometimes I pulled the car off the road to gaze at the snow-topped peaks, but I never went. I was scared to go alone. Fear kept me from leading the life I could.

We'd planned our hike for August, when my mother could watch the kids. We'd headed into the range on its eastern flank, intending to traverse several passes and exit the park through a western watershed four days later.

After lunch, I groaned as we started climbing again, my legs stiff as cardboard. It was always the worst on this, the second day. As my muscles warmed and began to work in coordinated rhythm, my thoughts began to wander. There is something about the thinness of alpine air. Light-headedness alters my thinking. I sift thoughts, mull things over.

* * *

Why didn't I get into the mountains more often?

Because I didn't feel safe in the woods without a male companion.

Why was I scared to go alone? Sure, there was the chance of an injury, a sprain or twisted ankle, but passing hikers were sure to help. Getting lost or falling off a cliff was unlikely if I stayed on the trail and the weather was decent. Perhaps I had buried anxiety about the immensity and isolation of the wilderness, or a primal fear of predators: bears, coyotes, and cougars. But I knew this was not it. What frightened me was the thought of nights alone in a tent—and what might lie outside. My fear was not of wild beasts. My fear was of men.

It stemmed from reports of attacks on women in the wilderness, which I read with a mix of fascination and repulsion, as some people can't stop themselves from reading about plane crashes. During my adolescence, I had been spooked by stories of a serial killer in Washington State, a man who stalked young women in state parks and dumped them in the woods. During my college years, I was rocked by news of two women brutally attacked in their tent in Oregon, and later by news of a serial killer in Yosemite. I knew I was safer in the forest alone than in some downtown parking lots at night, and I had been there often enough. Despite the facts, I felt more vulnerable in the woods.

I don't think of myself as a coward. I have taken risks others might avoid—scuba diving near sharks, paddling through alligator-infested swamps, navigating riots and once a coup in a place I didn't belong, and childbirth more than once. Perhaps my ignorance of real threat allowed me to partake with minimum fear.

We can, conversely, allow our activities to be censored by dangers of relatively low probability—plane crashes, snakebites, lightning strikes, earthquakes, or predators in the wilderness. It is our perception of risk that determines our actions.

In a 2018 article in the social sciences journal *Palgrave Communications* entitled "Fear of Crime: The Impact of Different Distributions of Victimization," authors Rafael Prieto Curiel and Steven Richard Bishop refer to research that concludes that fear of crime (even if there is a mismatch to the actual level of crime) can affect one's quality of life. They say studies prove that fear of crime can cause "paranoia, anxiety, and other psychological issues at a personal level" and at a broader social level can cause prejudice and isolation. The authors state: "Fear can also

transform some public places into no-go areas . . . which has a severe impact on the local prosperity."

When it comes to crime, public lands are quite safe. But my fear meant my nights in the wilderness were infrequent. It had affected my mobility.

* * *

We climbed through subalpine forest toward our highest camp. Below us, ridges and valleys stretched into the hazy distance. We were in the heart of the range, miles from the nearest road. Looking over a vast expanse reveals the scale of things. Town is small and far away, its inhabitants minute. Home, a dot on the landscape. Work, inconsequential. The kids are fine.

All that matters is the trail ahead. Watching for roots or loose rock. Keeping an eye out for cougars and bears (rarely seen). Spotting wildflowers: tiger lily, Jeffrey's shooting star, Indian paintbrush. The weather. Fresh water. What's for dinner. The climb up the next ridge. A fresh view. Nature teaches me to stay in the moment.

We heard a marmot call as we turned a switchback onto a rocky meadow of mountain buckwheat, sedge, and avalanche lily. Another answered. We stopped and listened. Marmots communicate using different whistles—a flat call, a descending call, a short ascending call that ends with a high chip, and a long single-trill alarm when a predator has been sighted, with continued trills indicating it's getting closer. They must have known we were there. Fear kept them in their burrows. We walked on.

* * *

Over the next half hour, I was tracked by a pesky horsefly. I had stopped to give it a swipe when I heard the crash of branches behind me. It was something big. I froze as it emerged from the wall of leaves.

It was not a bear, but a man. He wore a ragged T-shirt, dirt-stained trousers, and a bandanna around his neck and carried a small daypack. His hair stood six inches above his head, like a tangle of springs. There was a look in his eyes I'd seen in other trekkers that spent countless days alone in the mountains—a look of exhilaration, of wonder, an intensity that could be disconcerting.

At first, I didn't recognize him. Then I looked again. "Jimmie?" I said.

He hesitated, stepped closer, then his eyes brightened with recognition.

"How are you?" I said.

He smelled like he'd gone days without a shower.

He was doing great, camping down at the river for a week and taking day hikes. I had known Jimmie, the son of friends, since he was about eight but hadn't seen him for several years. A sweet, solitary kid, I had observed him pursue an interest or hobby unremittably during his boyhood, and then drop it to immerse himself in something new. He looked to be about seventeen now. He was probably in a wilderness phase.

He said that this hike was his farthest trip from his camp so far and if he didn't hurry, he wouldn't make it back before dark. He shifted his weight impatiently. We wished him happy trails, and he squeezed past. The vegetation engulfed him and soon I could no longer hear him.

I envied his lightness, his courage to spend days alone in the woods, his abandon to passion. I thought of the kids at home. I hoped they were doing okay.

Eventually, we made it through the overgrown area. Bushes gave way to fir, Alaska cedar, and mountain hemlock as we climbed in their shade. We pushed hard on the last mile and arrived at Marmot Lake. The tarn, nestled between slopes, glistened in the afternoon light.

We debated whether to camp there or continue up the ridge to smaller Heart Lake. But my thighs felt tight as jerky. We'd already walked three miles farther than planned when we took a deviation for a view. I needed to rest before our hike over O'Neil Pass the next day and our final hike out of the mountains through the Quinault watershed the day after. We decided to stay.

We had our pick of campsites, finally choosing one on the south bluff overlooking the lake. Another tent had been set up nearby. That evening, when our neighbors returned, we walked over to say hello.

"Have you seen any marmots?" the man asked. He spoke with an accent I couldn't place.

We told them about the one we'd spotted and the others we'd heard. They wanted to know the locations. They asked us to describe the marmot in detail—its girth and where the white patches were. They wanted to know whether we'd noticed any around the lake.

The couple were Polish graduate students who were

camping there for several weeks to observe and document the population and habits of the resident marmots, as part of a multiyear research project.

“*Marmota olympus* is endemic to these mountains,” the woman said. “We fear they may become extinct. The problem is predation.”

They picked up on our interest and explained the barriers to their survival.

The Olympic marmot has the lowest reproductive rate of any rodent. Females breed every other year and half of the pups may die before their first spring. Predators include cougars and eagles, but the coyote is the biggest threat. Since the killing off of the native wolves of the Olympic Peninsula in the 1920s, coyotes have moved in and multiplied.

The Polish woman told us that abandoned marmot colonies, marked by networks of burrows, were widespread in the alpine meadows of Olympic National Park. Part of their research was to map the vacant colonies. So far, no new families had moved in.

In meadows where the marmots did persist, their numbers had decreased by 80 percent from historic levels. This decline was especially noted in adult females, so essential for the survival of the species.

I remembered how my grandmother, who had grown up in the grasslands of New Mexico, described spending hours watching prairie dogs at play. I think it was one of her happiest memories of a harsh childhood. She would be sad to know that the towns of her youth have nearly disappeared. The prairie dog is now an endangered species. Too many predators.

In order to survive, Olympic marmots were spending more time on the lookout and less time seeking food and socializing. They were devoting increasing time and vital calories building additional escape routes to avoid straying too far from burrow entries when foraging. To make it through six to eight months of winter hibernation, marmots must double their body weight in the summer and fall.

The population of the Vancouver Island marmot (the Olympic marmot’s closest cousin) plummeted in the 1990s to fewer than one hundred, their existence since dependent on a captive breeding program.

Marmots may be more vulnerable because of climate change. In winters with less snow cover, marmots, known

as deep hibernators, have less insulation from the cold, making their young more susceptible to freezing. With warmer temperatures, conifer trees can sprout, which reduces meadows and the wildflowers that marmots forage on. Earlier snowmelt allows coyotes to move higher in the mountains, to marmot terrain. When marmots emerge in early May, they are weak and disoriented. Often, they need to relearn the colony’s landmarks. They sometimes wander around aimlessly until they locate their burrows, making them easier prey. As alpine daytime temperatures have risen, heat stress can force marmots to hunt for food in the cooler evenings, when coyotes are more difficult to notice.

“We only have a few days left here and have failed to locate several families.” The woman’s face darkened. “We’re afraid they’ve been lost.”

I realized the rodents were like kin to them.

On that disturbing note, we returned to our campsite. Dusk fell. We watched two older men descend from the pass. They set up camp below us next to the lake. Shortly after they pitched their tent, a bear meandered down to the far side of the lake and began to swim.

It cut through the water with grace and fluidity, making a lazy arc, past an island and across the widest section of lake, as though the swim were for pleasure, rather than expediency. Midswim, the bear turned in the direction of the men’s campsite. Realizing it was heading their way, they left their camp and hiked up the ridge. The bear came to shore a few yards from their tent, shook off, sniffed around, then slowly waddled away. The men returned to their site and hurriedly cooked up a meal.

I admired the bear’s ease and confidence as it grazed on grass and huckleberry. At the top of the food chain, it had no worries of predators here in the national park. I lost sight of it in the evening dusk. I was awakened once during the night by the sound of breaking branches near the tent and wondered whether the bear sometimes cruised the sites for scraps while campers were sleeping. I stayed alert, trying to hear whether it was getting closer or moving away, until at some point, I fell back asleep.

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The next morning, just after sunrise, my husband woke me to ask whether I wanted to hike to the upper lake. I yawned,

stretched my legs, and again felt the ache of my quads. I decided to pass. He said he wouldn’t be gone long.

I rolled over. “Okay. I’ll start packing.”

By the time I crawled out of the tent, he was gone and so were our marmot-seeking neighbors. It was quiet, except for a murmur of breakfast conversation from the men below. I scanned the edges of the lake for yesterday’s bear but didn’t see it. I walked down to the shore for water, washed and dried my feet, wrapped my tender heels with duct tape, ate breakfast, and reorganized my pack.

“It was pretty up there,” my husband said when he arrived back. “There was only one tent. A woman alone. She wants to hike back with us. She’s packing up now. I told her we’d wait for her.”

“Really?” I said. “You made friends that quick?”

“She screamed when she saw me. She was kind of freaked out.”

I looked up from the sleeping bag I was rolling.

“She didn’t sleep last night,” he said.

“Were there bears up there?”

“No. Humans. She told me men had frightened her.”

* * *

The young woman had arrived at the upper lake the day before, set up camp, and was sitting by the shore when a couple approached and asked whether she’d seen any marmots. She told them she’d seen a few by the other side of the lake. They got excited. The man wanted to know every detail, how many there were, their size, their markings.

She said she hadn’t looked closely. She wondered where these people had come from, why they didn’t carry packs, and where their camp was. She started to walk away, but they came after her. The man wanted her to lead them to the place she’d seen the marmots. She didn’t want to go anywhere with them.

They finally left. She could see them on the hill above, crouching, peering under rocks, staring at the ground, putting things in bags, then looking back at her. She kept an eye on the couple, going over in her head what she would do if they returned. But they wandered out of sight.

A while later, she heard the break of brush in the trees behind her. A man peeked out, then dropped back into the bushes. She wondered whether he was with the marmot people. Had they alerted him that she was alone?

When marmots emerge in early May, they are weak and disoriented. Often, they need to relearn the colony’s landmarks.

She watched the spot where he’d disappeared, but then he stepped out from behind another bush. He had wild hair, grimy clothes, only a daypack. He was approaching her with purpose.

He started talking about bears and the huckleberries. She could not miss the rapture in his voice. He said he’d seen bears yesterday and wanted to know whether she’d seen any. He stepped closer. Bits of twigs and leaves were caught up in his hair. He wanted to know whether she was camping there for long.

The young woman backed toward her tent. She had a knife in the outer pocket of her pack, and if she needed to, she would use it. She wondered whether she could get to her pack before he suspected her fear.

He retreated. He told her he was taking off but might be back tomorrow. He reminded her to get some huckleberries before the bears got them, and then he melted into the woods.

She contemplated hiking down the valley and sleeping near the river, but it was too late to make it before dark. She wished some other hikers, normal hikers with backpacks and tents, would come for the night, but as evening approached, she realized she’d be spending the night there alone.

The marmot people passed on their way back from wherever they’d been. They told her they would check back with her the next day to see whether she’d seen any more marmots.

There was one thing she knew for certain if she survived the night: she was not going to be there the next day. She couldn't sleep. She listened to the wind in the trees and to every rustle in the bushes, imagining it was the marmot man, or the wild man, or a bear. Finally, when the morning sun hit her tent, she dozed off.

"That's why she screamed," my husband said. "She has a nice tent. I'd stepped up to look at it, and she saw my shadow."

"Did you explain who the men were?" I asked.

"Yes. I told her we knew Jimmie. I explained that he's excitable and overly enthusiastic at times, but harmless."

"And the marmot people? They do seem kind of . . . intense. Too bad they didn't explain their work."

He'd told her about them, too.

The young woman arrived a half hour later. She looked tired and disheveled. She thanked us for letting her hike back with us. It was a steep slog up and over O'Neil Pass. We didn't talk much. She was probably too fatigued to chat.

* * *

I thought about fear and how it keeps women on edge, whether a threat is imagined or real. I thought of the routines that I and other women have developed to help us stay alert and feel safe. At night, we carry pepper spray, whistles, flashlights on our key chains, and make sure they are within reach. In the city, we park near streetlights and avoid garages. We walk with cell phone to ear, sometimes in fake conversation, to make it appear that we could easily call for help. We jog with headphones sometimes on mute, to not lose our vigilance. We download personal safety apps to share our location. We call friends to let them know we've made it home.

Our caution is not unreasonable: at least one out of every six American women has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime. Harassment is a regular experience, especially for young women.

When we go out at night, we make plans to meet friends beforehand, so we don't have to walk into a bar alone. When we go to the bathroom we take our drink with us, so it is never out of sight. We watch out for each other and use code words to communicate how things are going with a man we have recently met.

When walking home alone at night, we will take

a longer route if it seems safer. We avoid eye contact or cross the street to avoid groups of men who are drunk or loitering and think of escape routes if we are followed. In some neighborhoods, we feel like prey. Some places, we weigh whether it's safe to walk at all. We leave with a friend, take a taxi, or drive short distances. Women walk less than men and hike less, too. It is not laziness. It is self-preservation.

I remember some years ago, while living in Ecuador, I was walking home from work one night when there was a citywide electrical blackout. I pulled a flashlight from my bag, turned it on, and continued walking. Soon I heard a shuffling behind me and turned to see three or four women following closely. As we continued, more joined our silent group until we had formed a pack. At first, I was surprised, but then I sobered when I realized they had come together for safety. Beyond the arc of my flashlight, strangers hovered in doorways and alleys. The darkness was potentially perilous. Whether or not those in shadows intended harm, we were all aware that attacks on women occur more often where there are no witnesses—in the dark or in the woods.

* * *

I looked at the young woman hiking in front of me. I admired her for her act of feminine resistance to the taboo of camping alone in the woods. I felt sorry that she hadn't felt safe and wondered whether she would ever go alone again.

The irony, for both of us, was that statistically, women have a much lower chance of being sexually assaulted on public lands than nearly anywhere else. Of the 120,441 reported rapes in the U.S. in 2018, the overwhelming majority took place in cities and suburbs, not state and national parks. But fear can be debilitating, leading to panic or paranoia.

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We didn't see or hear any more marmots on the hike over the pass.

"I wonder what can be done about predators," my husband said.

I assumed he was talking about coyotes. We discussed possibilities: shooting them, capturing and relocating them, and reintroducing wolves. We were frustrated at the lack

of easy solutions. We agreed there was little that could be done to change the out-of-balance predator-to-prey ratio. We hoped the marmots would survive.

We made it over the pass, then descended a steep trail until we reached a swollen river. The bridge had washed out, and we helped each other over the slippery log that had replaced it. We trudged across a sandbar and then leapfrogged on stones through a shallower branch. We continued beneath giant cedar, fir, and hemlock through forest and wetland, appropriately called the Enchanted Valley. We camped that night near the banks of the Quinault.

Riverside, the humidity increased. The trees thickened. Clouds rolled in and the sky darkened. As we threaded our way out of the valley the next day, a heaviness came over me. It was not my spent legs, but the specter of resuming my life in the lowlands—the imminent return to work, the consuming energy of the kids, the weight of responsibility, the acceptance of the way things were.

I could not get the young woman's terror out of my mind. I felt exasperated by our slow progress in improving the status and safety of women. I vowed to resist—to shirk the role of prey. I would return to the wilderness soon. If I were still not brave enough to go alone, I would go with others.

* * *

In the ensuing years, I have hiked and camped every summer, sometimes with my husband or children, sometimes with other women. I am still working to overcome my fear of camping alone in the wilderness.

The Olympic marmot population has stabilized in the northeastern and southwestern sections of the park. Designated a sensitive species, rather than endangered, the marmots have reclaimed some of their abandoned colonies. The population of the Vancouver Island marmot, though the species is still endangered, has rebounded from less than thirty to over two hundred. On a recent visit to Hurricane Ridge, I saw healthy adult marmots in the park meadows.

Experts are studying how the species is beating the odds and trying to determine whether the shift will continue. Marmots appear to have trained their pups to be more alert. They have employed complex cooperative strategies, such as building additional tunnels and planting

decoys when members of the colony are out foraging in cooler evenings. They have increased their survivability by modifying their habitat for the safety of the group, while adjusting to the effects of a changing climate.

I like to believe that we can learn from nature. By facing the problem, sounding the alarm, communicating, educating our young, and working together to construct an environment that is safe for our most vulnerable—we, too, can take back the woods.

Teresa H. Janssen's prose has been designated notable in *The Best American Essays* and has received the Norman Mailer Writing Award for Middle School and High School Teachers. Her writing has appeared in *ZYZZYVA*, *Lunch Ticket*, *The Los Angeles Review*, and elsewhere. She lives in Washington State, where she hikes and writes about environmental, social, and spiritual issues.