

Every day, on her way home from school, Madison walked by the top of a little canyon. There had been a fire there the summer after second grade, and heavy rains the following winter had caused a mudslide, wiping out much of the brush and all of the paths where she and her Dad had taken Buster for his evening walks.

Since then she had witnessed how the canyon filled with trash and debris, and then a little brushy growth. By now, the ground was largely covered in sage, manzanita, and scrub oak; and a low hedge that the city had planted along the sidewalk at the top of the slope. There were aloes and several spires of expired Century plants. One new one was just beginning to flower.

Madison liked to think of the century plants as the guardians of the canyon, protecting it and keeping at bay the spirits of whatever poor creatures had perished in the fire and subsequent mudslide. And whenever she passed the canyon, on her way to or from the middle school, she would make a silent greeting and small gesture of thanks to them.

One afternoon, as she approached, she noticed a half-eaten burrito, wrapped in yellow waxy paper and lying in the gutter. For a moment she stared, not recognizing the lumpy form as food. She began to feel angry as she imagined some thoughtless teenager, driving by too fast and tossing his half-eaten lunch out the car window, leaving his mess behind in her beautiful neighborhood. She felt a flash of disappointment and irrational anger at the century plants, for failing in their duty as protectors of the canyon. She didn't want to touch the thing, but it seemed no one else would take responsibility for the neighborhood, so she approached.

She reached into her backpack, searching for something to pick it up with but, just then, a scrawny little dog appeared. Smaller than Buster, but the same creamy color, it had wiry hair instead of Buster's smooth coat, and was very dirty and undernourished. It had darted out from behind the hedge and, almost before Madison was able to register its presence, certainly before she had any chance to react, it had scooped up the burrito in its mouth and disappeared again down the canyon.

Madison was intrigued. She assumed the dog was a stray, somehow lost by its people, probably living alone, there in the canyon. She imagined that it might sneak into the neighborhood at night, especially on trash night, stealing whatever bits of food it could find and drinking from the sprinkler heads in the lawns and gardens of her neighbors and friends. With no definite purpose in mind, she decided to follow the beast.

Remembering the informal but well-travelled paths she had taken as a child with her dad, she pushed through a break in the hedge. The old paths were gone, but there were random openings in the growth here and there, places where a small dog or even a girl might find a passage. She could hear, and occasionally see, the rustle of the bushes where the dog was moving and she followed it as best she could until she came to a sort of clear space, partly surrounded by a patch of manzanita thicker and taller than most of the nearby growth.

There sat the dog, the now empty burrito wrapper in front of it, on a corner of a stained and ripped sleeping bag. At the far end of the bag was a plastic Albertson's bag full of clothing, arranged like a pillow. Madison took a step back and spoke aloud. "Somebody lives here," she said. The dog lifted its lip and offered a quiet growl, as if to confirm her observation.

A little pile of magazines—Scientific American, Sun and Mother Jones—told Madison that whoever the somebody was who occupied the clearing had been educated well. A larger pile of empty bottles and an old coffee can full of cigarette butts said that education was no insurance against a life of tragedy. She heard a cough and a low curse from beyond the manzanita, and saw movement there. A face appeared, covered in stubble and topped with a shock of long grey-blond hair the same color

as the dog's, and just as wiry. The dog turned to face the man, tail in motion, while Maddy turned the opposite direction and fled.

Panicked, Maddy couldn't locate the paths she had followed to reach this place. She moved in as straight a line as she could, following whatever track was open and going uphill, the direction in which, she knew without thinking, she would find her sidewalk. She tripped once over a rock and scraped the heel of her hand catching herself. She tore her leggings breaking through a thicker part of the hedge, but soon she was at the road where the sight of cars, going by too fast, made her feel safer. From there, she hurried the last few blocks to her house.

When she got home, Maddy asked her mother if it would be alright for her to be picked up after school for the rest of the semester. Her mom gave her a quizzical look and glanced at the rip in her leggings. Then she said, "OK, honey, if that's what you want." Maddy went up to her room to change.

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