

OUT OF
THE
LION'S
DEN

BY
SUSAN MATTERN

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Mr. David Wade, a wildlife artist, painted the cover picture. I was able to use it courtesy of Outdoor Life Magazine.

This is a heartfelt true story of a mother's quest for truth in the wake of a tragic mountain lion attack on her young daughter. Susan Mattern genuinely recounts her search for answers in court and her search for ultimate truth in her heart. If you've never questioned your faith, this book is a splendid guide as you look through the eyes of a family's pain and hope. If you've already experienced moments of doubt, then this book is a kindred spirit that beckons you to share the journey. It is a powerful story that will help focus your own fears and doubts, and compel you to reflect on the meaning of choices, values, happenstance, and life itself.

Paul J. Levesque, Professor of Religious Studies, California State University Fullerton

To Laura

Prologue

August, 1991

The courtroom was packed with reporters, setting up video cameras and equipment along the back wall. They knew a verdict had been reached. Don slid in next to me and held my hand. We watched the schoolroom clock on the pale green wall skitter ahead, four minutes at a time, while we waited for a late juror. Finally, he ran across the tile floor, out of breath, his heels echoing on the floor like little gunshots.

The foreman handed the judge the verdict. I held my breath. Then I let it out. Nothing was happening. In the movies the verdict is one piece of paper. This verdict looked like a book.

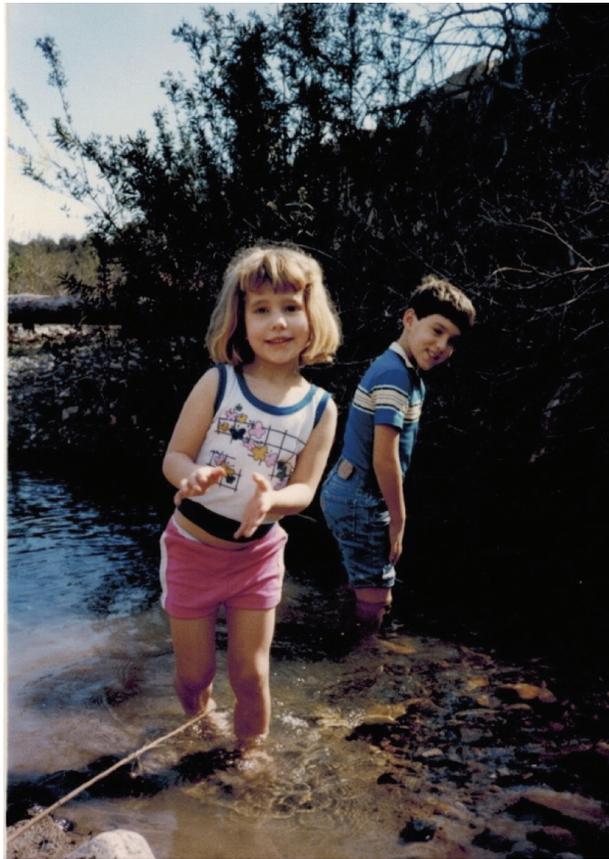
As if in slow motion, the judge put on his glasses and started reading. He picked up a pen, held it for a few seconds, then bent over slightly and started to write. He turned the first page. My stomach churned. I clenched Don's hand tightly.

The judge wasn't smiling. I had seen his face light up with his wide smile a thousand times during the trial. He turned the second page, his face impassive. Oh God, we must have lost the case. The judge wasn't on our side, but I hoped he'd at least be pleased if we won.

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The last five years swirled before me like a kaleidoscope. The mountain lion, five years of emergency rooms, endless operations, therapy, tears, screaming at an absent God, my family and their constant love, and always the mountain lion. All the images swirled back to that day when everything changed, that perfect spring day.

Chapter 1



Laura and David at Casper's Park

Palm Sunday, March 23, 1986

My five-year-old daughter Laura and I are standing in the little stream at Casper's Park. Crystal water curls around our ankles and dances gently downstream. Laura squeals in delight as a brown minnow darts past her tiny feet, then picks up a shiny pebble to show me.

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“This one’s pretty,” she tells me.

I take the smooth green stone and put it in my shirt pocket with some black seeds. We’ll add it to her collection.

Laura looks up at me with her perfectly round face and bright blue eyes. “When are they coming back?”

My husband Don and nine-year old son David have been gone a few minutes. Don, the scientist, always has to find out what’s over the next hill.

“They’ll be back soon.” I take her hand and point downstream. “See, it looks like diamonds on the water.”

We both look to where the sun lights the water with a thousand white jewels. Then the stream turns and disappears under the huge live oak trees, their gnarled branches hovering ghostlike over the dark water. I turn back to Laura, standing in the sun, her hair golden.

This March afternoon is Southern California at its best. We come to this park often. It’s only about ten minutes from the coastal town of San Juan Capistrano, and about twenty minutes from our house. The rain a few days ago filled the stream and washed the sky to a deep blue. A hint of lime green covers the hills, and orange poppies dot the hillsides by the thousands, shimmering in the slight breeze.

Laura’s hand wiggles out of mine. “Can I look for tadpoles now?” She takes a step away from me and bends over the water. Her straight blond hair covers her face as she looks down. She won’t be distracted by anything.

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Over the whisper of the water, I hear the chirping birds and the low hum of a thousand insects. An odd rustling sound makes me turn, and out of the corner of my eye, I see a large tan dog running directly at Laura. I see the muscles rippling as it runs, the short round ears, the huge velvet paws.

By the time I realize it's a mountain lion, the creature has reached Laura and grabbed her by the head. Even as my hand reaches out, even as I stumble towards her, I know I'm too late.

I'm standing alone in the stream listening to the splashing of the water. Where's Laura? She was just here a minute ago. I glance around. The birds are quiet and the hum of the insects has stopped, like a radio turned off. The overwhelming silence presses down on me. Something has happened.

The sun is warm on my back. Laura is gone. I don't know where she is. I look to the bank where she was just standing and she isn't there. The silence is loud, and then I remember the mountain lion. The tawny body, huge and muscular, slid silently towards her. The enormous jaws reached for her head. That's my last memory. I scream for help.

The trees sway above my head. Leaning over in the stream, taking huge gulps of air, the sound of my own screams is horrible in my ears. Words spill out, but I don't know what they are.

My feet can't move out of the shallow water. I bend over for more air. I'm going to faint. Laura, my daughter, my little girl, is gone, and I don't know where

she is. I choke, a sickening taste in my mouth. She is gone, forever, taken away by a huge mountain lion.

Don appears in front of me, his face red from running and panic in his eyes.

“A mountain lion took Laura! I don’t know where she is!”

Don turns and runs back down the trail. Why is he going away? I need him to find her, and now he’s gone again. I see the red plaid of his shirt disappearing behind the trees. I don’t know why he’s running away.

The water splashes around my ankles as I look around aimlessly. Laura is gone, and her little white sandals lie neatly together on the bank.

The sandals lure me toward the sandy bank. I walk slowly toward them, the pebbles hard under my feet, and step out of the stream. The air feels heavy and strange, like something terrible is about to happen. But the day is still beautiful, the diamonds sparkling, the sun shining.

Nothing has happened. This is a dream, and I’m about to wake up. Waking up is hard, but I have to try. My arm and hand look so real in front of me. I can touch them. This is a terrible dream. I have to be patient, and it’ll stop soon.

My brown loafers are thrown on the bank. I need to put them on, in case we go somewhere. My feet are wet. I look for a towel, but there isn’t one. I slip my wet feet into the shoes.

I have no idea what to do now. The plastic container for the tadpoles is on the sand. I leave it. My

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camera is sitting on an old tree stump. I might need it. I don't remember why.

I reach down and pick it up by the body, not the strap. The strap goes carefully over my head so it won't accidentally drop. I'm always dropping the camera. How silly of me.

We need to go somewhere, but I can't remember where. The strawberry stand. I remember now. We're going to stop there on the way home. We're going to have strawberry shortcake for dessert tonight. Where are Don and David? And Laura?

A slight moan makes me turn. Laura. I run toward the sound, struggling through cactus and manzanita, pushing them aside.

I can't get through. The spines grab my arms and tear at my hands. I push them away. The thorns slice at my bare legs. I don't hear the moaning anymore. Stopping and listening doesn't help. Maybe a little further. A huge clump of cactus is ahead of me. I can't get around it. My arms just push through it, and I stumble and stop.

The lion is in front of me like a statue, motionless. It holds Laura by the back of her neck, and she hangs from its mouth like a rag doll.

My hands could reach out and touch the fur.

The lion watches me with blank, horrible eyes.

I don't know what to do. If I move closer, it'll run away with her, and she'll be lost again, forever this time. I scream. The sound seems distant, but I can feel my body screaming. The lion's ears flick in annoyance as I

stare helplessly into its cold eyes. They have nothing in them but emptiness.

We watch each other.

The lion's massive body sits silently on the ground. I can see the individual hairs, dirty and matted. My screams don't affect it at all. The huge paws rest firmly on the ground, on each side of Laura's body. It has no fear.

Laura's hair is covered with blood, and I can't see her face. Her arms fall limply at her sides and her small hands scrape the dusty ground. Her blue flowered blouse is stained with bright crimson, and the dripping blood pools underneath her head.

The lion watches me.

I hear a sound behind me. A man stumbles up, and when he sees the lion and Laura, he stops, terror in his eyes.

He stands motionless for a second. "I'll be back. I have to get a gun." He runs away.

My sudden flicker of hope fades as he disappears from the edge of my sight. I scream again. It's all I can do. I try to think, but it's like slogging through mud. One thought comes to me. If I try to reach out to Laura, the mountain lion will turn and run away with her. I'll never see her again. I can't let that happen.

A man brushes past me. He says nothing, but pulls off a red manzanita branch, and walks slowly toward the lion. I'm there watching, but then everything goes blank. I don't see anything. I don't remember anything.

"Pick up your baby and get out of here."

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Waking up suddenly, I realize the thin man is talking to me, and the lion is gone. Laura lies limp on the hard ground. I run to her, motionless in a pool of blood, kneel, and gently pick her up from the reddening dirt. I think she's dead. She isn't moving.

I can't look at her face, but I hurriedly put my hands behind her back and head, and hold her over my shoulder like I did when she was a baby. There's blood dripping everywhere.

Turning quickly, I run toward the stream. I don't know where I'm going.

Don runs up just as I reach the stream. He looks frightened, and that scares me. His face is red and puffy. He pulls off his red plaid jacket and wraps it around her head.

"Hold her down like this," he says, and I know somehow that he's right. He always knows what to do. I cradle her in my arms. Now everything will be all right, I think with a glimmer of hope. Then I realize, with an excruciating blackness, that nothing will ever be all right again. Don doesn't know yet what I know, that Laura is dead in my arms. I've seen the blood.

Don leads the way, and I run across the stream, holding Laura.

"Where's David?" I panic.

"He's with that man." Don is panting as he waits for me.

I can't think. I'm running as fast as I can. Laura is heavy in my arms, but we have to get help. I put one foot in front of the other. It's getting harder to run as the ground slopes upward.

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Green grass and wildflowers blur by my side. Loose pebbles slip under my wet shoes. The trail widens into a dirt road. I have to stop, out of breath, just for a second.

Laura's arm hangs limply. I see her little motionless hand that I was holding just a few minutes ago. I can't see her face. It's covered with Don's red plaid jacket.

Don stops and turns back to me and takes Laura carefully from my arms. He looks so frightened, but he can't be. He knows how to solve every problem.

I try to keep up with him. It's easier running without Laura. I glance at my watch. It looks unfamiliar to me, a silly watch I bought at the grocery store for five dollars. It has a picture of a Disney witch on it. Laura thought it was funny.

Two o'clock in the afternoon. My friend Linda is just getting home from church. I need to call her. Maybe she can help. I don't know why I'm thinking this. It's such a strange thought. Maybe if we can get past these trees and campgrounds and back to the picnic area, then everything will be better. I can't think about Laura dying.

People are in the picnic area, under huge live oak trees next to red and yellow tents. Smoke curls from barbeques. I hear faraway laughter. Why are they having fun? Laura isn't moving at all. It seems cruel that other people are laughing. Everything seems so very far away.

Don screams at them, "There's a mountain lion. Get out of here!" No one moves. They don't hear him.

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Pebbles and rocks slip under my shoes. The sun is getting hotter. Don stops, breathing heavily. I take Laura from him and start running again.

“Somebody help us,” I try to scream, but my voice is a whisper. I think this road ends in a dirt parking lot. It must be close with all the people and picnic tables we’ve seen.

I can’t think about my daughter dying in my arms.

Linda will be getting home and I’ll find a telephone and tell her what happened. I can’t think about Laura right now. Just focus on the trail.

The lion is in my eyes, staring at me.

How can I live without Laura? I push the thought away.

The gravel road goes up a hill. I can’t go any further, but I have to. With a last burst of energy, I start to run.

As we reach the crest of the hill, the green bushes and grass blurring beside us, a man appears in front of me, arms outstretched.

It’s the thin man who fought off the lion. He’s taking Laura from me, and I’m just handing my daughter to a complete stranger. But he’s the man who saved her. I let go of Laura.

Don is next to me, bending over, out of breath.

The man turns with Laura, and runs quickly down the hill. A green ranger truck is waiting at the bottom of the road, past the long rope chains, its engine running. We reach the end of the road. It must be there for Laura. Someone got help for us. A man with a ranger hat sits behind the wheel. His worried expression

frightens me. The man holding Laura puts her gently on the vinyl front seat, jumps in the back, and the truck starts to move.

“Wait! We’re her parents!” I stumble down the hill in a panic. They can’t leave without us.

The truck stops and Don climbs in the back. David is sitting in the back, and I open the cab door and slide on the seat next to Laura.

She is propped up next to the ranger, her head slumped over in an odd position, like a broken doll, not moving at all. I don’t dare move her.

There is blood everywhere. The ranger looks at me as I try to hold her steady, and, in a reassuring voice, he says. “She’ll be all right.”

He’s lying, just trying to make me feel better.

The truck bounces on the dirt road. I feel it jump up on the sudden paved road, and the ride is smoother. My arms hold Laura, so she won’t fall over on the seat. I think she might be breathing. I can’t tell. We drive faster, leaning into the curves. The walkie-talkie sputters mechanical sounds that make no sense, but the ranger answers and says we’re on our way. I don’t know where.

The truck pulls up to the visitor center. A ranger runs around and takes Laura carefully from the seat, Don’s jacket still covering her head. I follow them into a small windowless room. The walls are white, with a cot by the wall and a stand with bandages and a bottle of hydrogen peroxide. There must be more medical supplies but I don’t see anything.

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The little room is crowded. A ranger asks me to stand outside so I walk out the door. He looks worried. I don't think he knows what to do.

Don and David are standing by the white wall. The three of us stand there, waiting, not together, but each of us alone on that concrete walkway.

The lion looms in front of me. I can't get it out of my eyes. It replays over and over, like a video, that same scene. The lion looks blankly into my eyes.

I hear a siren. It must be for Laura. I lean against the white concrete wall, hoping that someone can help her. I want to be with her, but the two rangers are inside and there's no more room. My shaking hands are covered with blood.

The ambulance stops directly in front of me. Two paramedics jump out. There's a moment of confusion, and then a ranger leads them into the small room. I want to be with her. I walk to the doorway, but a ranger stops me. The room is too crowded. This is my daughter, I plead with him silently. But I stay outside.

When I close my eyes, the lion races toward Laura. When I open my eyes, it stares at me.

A man comes up and throws a glass of water in my face. I think he's trying to wash the blood off my face, but I don't even ask him why. He's the man who wanted to get the gun. He stands, talking with a woman. I can't hear anything they're saying.

I can't stand up anymore. My body sinks down on the concrete walk, and my hands feel the warm sidewalk. I close my eyes tightly in an attempt to shut everything out, but the attack replays in my mind.

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Laura has to be alive or they would tell us. Why are they waiting so long to get help? There's nothing in that room to help her. She needs to be in a hospital. She needs to go in the ambulance. I don't understand.

Don walks up to a ranger. I can't hear what they're saying, but Don comes over to me and says they're waiting for a helicopter. Why isn't it here? I look at my watch. When we ran down the trail it was two o'clock and now it's almost three. I can distinguish some words from the muffled sounds coming from the room: "helicopter," "San Juan Capistrano," "Swallows Day." At last a ranger comes out and talks to Don. I get up awkwardly and walk over to them.

"We're trying to get a helicopter. It's only three minutes by helicopter to Mission Hospital. We don't want to take the ambulance because we're worried about the freeway traffic. It's Swallow's Day at the mission."

Tears come to my eyes. No matter how bad the traffic was, they could have been at the hospital by now. But I have to put my trust in these people. I hope the helicopter comes soon. I feel helpless.

The man who saved Laura, thin and slightly built, is sitting on the grass talking to David. He was so brave to go in there with the branch. I have no idea what he did. He somehow drove off the lion and saved Laura.

I have betrayed my daughter. The thought washes coldly over me. I should have been the one who saved her. Instead, I stood by stupidly and watched someone else rescue her. When the test came, I failed.

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A bitter taste fills my mouth. I want her to live so much. How can she live, with all the blood she's lost?

Suddenly everyone is moving. The helicopter is coming and will land in a field down the road. The paramedics carry Laura to the ambulance, and I run to her side. The paramedic nods and I climb up the back step. Don and David get in the ranger truck.

Laura's head is covered with a towel, but blood seeps new and crimson onto the white cloth. Between the paramedics, I see just a glimpse of her on the stretcher in the cramped ambulance. I hold on to a strap from the ceiling as we swerve around curves.

I'm the first to climb out. We're next to a large field of waist-high wildflowers and poppies. Don and David come up next to me. My son will be so excited to see the helicopter. He loves airplanes and even though he's only nine, he knows the name of every fighter jet in the world. Then I remember that Laura is dying.

I lean on Don and put my arm around David. What looks like a brown toy comes over the blue mountain ridge, growing larger every second. Hovering over the field, the blurred blades whip the tall brown grass into waves.

A fireman stands by in case the field catches fire. The helicopter sets down gently on the grass, and the individual blades slow to a stop. One of the paramedics runs toward the helicopter and climbs inside. The other takes Laura and runs by us, not stopping, to the open helicopter door. I reach out to Laura, and again I'm too late.

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Don grabs a ranger's arm and asks if we can go, but there's only room for the pilot and the paramedic holding Laura. I grab Don's hand, resting on David's back. The brown grass flattens in waves as the helicopter blades spin slowly, then blur. The helicopter wobbles as it slowly rises, then hangs motionless in the air before it moves away, gathering speed. I watch till it disappears beyond the hills.

The grass is motionless and I strain to hear a sound, but there's only silence. A policeman walks toward us, his shoes crunching the gravel path, and asks if we want to ride with him to the hospital. I look at the empty sky and slide in the back seat of his patrol car.

The police car retraces our happy ride of a few hours ago. We reach the park entrance and slow down for a speed bump. There are cars lined up at the entrance, waiting to go in the park. The ranger is motioning for them to turn away. He sees us and waves us on like he's in control of the police car.

I lean against the window and watch as the trees slip by. How ugly they are. The oak trees reach over the road, their branches overgrown and brown, hiding a thin layer of new green leaves. Dead grass whips by, and the faraway hills slip in and out of my vision. Trees blur beside the road. I hate this road. I promise myself that I'll never go down it again.

I look at my bare white legs and try to pull out some of the cactus spines. There are hundreds of them. I don't remember going through that much cactus. It's terrible that I'm thinking about myself. But I don't want to think about Laura.

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We're on the freeway now, and the siren is loud in my ears. We pull to the center divider and pass all the cars. It feels odd to be in a police car. I remember why we're in it and where we're going. I pray that Laura is still alive. Just a few hours ago we drove down this same freeway, laughing and joking about the day, hoping to catch some tadpoles for David's science experiment at school. Now I look out the window and catch sight of those perfect clouds in the blue sky. Nothing will ever be the same again.

Chapter 2



Laura two days before attack

Sunday, March 23, Mission Hospital

As we speed down the freeway, I ask God to save her life. I don't care what's wrong with her, just so she lives. I know He can do anything. I've been a Catholic all my life, a nun for six years, and leaving the convent hasn't lessened my belief in God's power.

I wonder suddenly why God let this happen. She's only five-years old. She's never done anything wrong. And there are so many other children who get hurt and die. I never wondered why. Of course I know all about

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good and evil and why bad things happen to people. But right now, I just can't think of any possible reason why God would let this happen.

We pull off the freeway and into the emergency entrance of Mission Hospital. We get out and stand unsure on the curb. David stares longingly at the helicopter just a few feet away, where the pilot has his hand on the helicopter door, talking to the paramedic. He waves to us in recognition. David quickly waves back. The policeman leads us through the automatic doors.

We want to see Laura, but a volunteer takes us down the long green corridor to a small waiting room. I look back. The policeman is looking down at the black and white linoleum floor.

Don and I sit on the hard vinyl chairs. David sits between us, his mud-splattered legs swinging back and forth in his big tennis shoes. One shoe is untied. I close my eyes. I see the lion and open them quickly.

I stare at my bare legs and pick out more cactus spines. A generic picture of a washed-out forest hangs tilted on the far wall.

A distinguished man in a white lab coat walks in. "I'm Dr. Michael Kennedy, head of the trauma team. We'll be taking your daughter into surgery soon. We have a neurosurgeon, a plastic surgeon, and an ophthalmologist on our team, and we'll try to keep you informed of everything that's happening."

He quickly shakes our hands and walks out of the room. I sit down again.

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In the silence, David looks up at me and says, “Mom, I think she’s going to be all right.” I hold his hand tight. For some reason, David’s nine-year old confidence makes me feel better. He’s such a good son. We sit quietly for a few minutes. I want to call my friend Linda. I keep thinking that she can help, although I don’t know how.

“Don,” I touch his shoulder, “I’m going to call Linda.” He nods, and then stares straight ahead. I walk outside the door, spot a volunteer and ask for a telephone. She points to the lobby and hurries on.

I know Linda’s number by heart. I think back to this morning’s Palm Sunday services. Laura sat on the piano bench with me while I played. I was so afraid she would accidentally touch the keyboard that I sent her down to sit with David in the congregation. Afterwards, I bought some Easter eggs for them outside the church. I desperately want to be back there, this morning, when life was still good.

“Hi.” Linda’s cheerful voice answers.

“Linda?” My voice catches.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s Laura. She got attacked by a mountain lion. We’re down at Mission Hospital and she’s going into surgery.”

“What!”

“I don’t know if she’s going to live.” I finish quickly, not daring to say more as my throat tightens.

“Oh my God. I’ll be down as soon as I can.”

I hang up the phone, and sit for a minute in the busy lobby. There, that was simple to say. I feel like a

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character in a play, reciting my lines. Nothing seems real. I shake my head, trying to clear it, and walk back to the waiting room.

Another doctor walks in. He's tall with tightly curled brown hair. He has a kind look about him.

"I'm Doctor Weiss, a pediatric ophthalmologist. I'll be checking your daughter's eye during surgery. The pressure in her right eye is low, and we need to find out why."

As he shakes my hand, he looks at me with such a sad expression, I want to tell him that everything will be fine, and then I remember, it's Laura's life that hangs in the balance.

We sit in silence. David looks through magazines. Don stares straight ahead, not saying anything. For once, I'm glad not to talk. What can be said? Laura is dying. No one can lose that amount of blood and still live. I see the lion, no matter where I look in the room. I can't wipe it off my mind. I want to tear it out of my eyes.

Linda appears at the door with her husband Joe. She's still dressed for church, her short black hair neatly framing her thin face. I stand up and we hug as she cries for me. My best friend will help me, even though I don't know how.

The policeman from the park asks Don about our car. The car. It's still at the park. I had forgotten all about it. I don't ever want to see that park again. I hate it. Don goes with him, while Linda and I sit in the waiting room.

"Do you want to tell me what happened?"

I start to tell the story. I don't cry or feel any emotion at all, because it's a story, just a story. I can't connect it with what just happened to us.

Linda cries, but my eyes are dry. I see the lion every time I close them.

I look up at the clock every few minutes, wondering when the surgery will begin. It's been over two hours. Don comes back from the park, looking pale and sick.

"Have you heard anything?"

"No, nothing."

He stands in front of me, uncertain.

"I need to tell you something. Come out here with me."

We walk out in the corridor. "I got the car. But when I was down there, the ranger said something really strange. He said, 'I'm sorry about your daughter. I hope she'll be all right.' Then he said, 'We've been having a lot of trouble with that mountain lion lately.'"

I look at Don, trying to understand. It comes to me in a rush.

"They knew the lion was there? And they didn't say anything?"

"That's what the ranger said. I must have looked shocked, because he stopped then and didn't say anything else. I have a feeling he wasn't supposed to tell me that." Don shakes his head.

"We even asked if everything was ok." I'm trying to make sense of it.

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I think back to when we drove into the park. It had rained a lot in the last few weeks, so Don asked the ranger about the roads.

“Is there anything else we need to know?” Don asked, always careful. The ranger looked up at the long line of cars behind us. “No, have a nice day.”

Don and I stand silently for a minute. I don’t even have the emotional energy to give him a hug. I touch his arm. His face, usually serious, looks like a mask has been pulled over it. We walk back in the waiting room. I can’t think about the ranger right now.

A woman in a pin-striped suit walks briskly into the room. “I’m sorry to bother you, but we had a phone call from the *Los Angeles Times*. They’d like to talk to you about your daughter. If you want, you can use the phone in the lobby.” She hands me a small piece of yellow paper with a phone number, turns and leaves the room.

“How did they find out about Laura?” I whisper to Don.

Don looks at me from far away. “They have to file a police report. And the call went out for the ambulance and helicopter.”

Of course they would know by now.

I clench the little yellow paper. “Do you want to talk to them?”

He looks up at me, his face empty. “Why don’t you do it?”

I sit back in the uncomfortable chair. I don’t want to talk to anyone. Then I think about our friends. My

mom and dad! I have to call them. They love her so much. I have to call them and let them know.

Don looks up at me. “Maybe it would be good to talk to the paper. To get the story right.”

I wander out to the phone in the lobby and make the call. The reporter thanks me and wants to know every detail. I’m not used to so many questions. He assures me that the article will be in the morning’s paper and asks if I have a picture of Laura. No, and I’m not going home to get a picture. My place is here. Home seems very far away. He hopes Laura will be fine and we hang up.

I have to call my mom and dad. They live in St. Louis and they’re in their seventies, too old for news like this. I put my hand on the phone but I can’t pick it up. If I tell them about Laura, it will be real. It’ll go on and on and last forever.

My mom is the official worrier for the whole family. She reminds us about snakes when we go hiking, and worries about car accidents, train wrecks, cancer, and seat belts. Don and I just laugh at most of her warnings, not to her face, of course. I don’t want to live my life being afraid. Maybe mom was right. We had plenty to worry about. We just didn’t know it.

There is still a part of me that doesn’t believe this has happened. I’ll call my sister Carol. She’ll know what to do. I dial my sister’s number.

The connection is bad and she can’t hear me very well. I talk louder and repeat that it was a mountain lion. She can’t believe what I’m telling her. Why would she? I can barely believe it. She wants to fly out right

away but I want her to tell Mom and Dad. I promise to call as soon as Laura gets out of surgery. Carol decides that she and Jane, my other sister, will go down and tell Mom and Dad. They'll be waiting for my call.

I hang up. My eyes are dry. When I get back to the waiting room, our pediatrician, Dr. Shannon, is there. I feel better knowing that he's come to help. He's wearing his usual jeans and cowboy boots, and a plaid shirt with all the trimmings. David stands up shyly and says hello. Dr. Shannon gives us all a hug and says he'll be in surgery with the trauma team. His presence fills the room and when he leaves, everyone is quiet again.

Sunday evening, March 23

A volunteer tells us Laura has been taken into surgery and escorts us down the hall to a different waiting room. The time is 5 pm. I sit with nothing in my hands. My purse has been lost somewhere.

The minutes tick by slowly. No one says anything. A dark smudge on the wall bothers me. I want to get up and wash it off. I don't want to think about anything else.

Linda's voice startles me. "Maybe we should go to the restroom and you can clean up a little." I look at my hands and clothes with the bloodstains on them. I'm embarrassed that she had to mention it, and then I don't really care.

We walk to a restroom. I lean over the sink, lit by cold fluorescent lights, and stare in the mirror. The lights make me look old and tired. I'm thirty-six years old and look like I'm fifty. My shoulder-length brown

hair hangs limply. I look pale without any makeup. My thin wire glasses reflect the bright lights above me.

I use wet brown paper towels to wash my face and hands, but the towels fall apart. I try washing my legs, but cactus spines are still in them and I stop. My blouse is red and white checkered and I realize a lot of the red is blood. I have to go home and take care of things like clothes and the house and getting cleaned up, but nothing matters right now except Laura. I stare at the mirror. I've run out of things to do. Everything is closing in on me. Linda asks if I'm finished and we walk back to the waiting room.

I look at the clock. Almost eight o'clock. Laura's been in surgery for three hours. I wonder how much longer it's going to take. A young man in blue scrubs walks in. "Mr. Small?" he says to the room. Don and I stand up and follow him into the hall. He's younger than I am, handsome with curly black hair, probably a medical assistant.

"I'm Dr. Sylvain Palmer, the neurosurgeon on the trauma team. I'll be honest. Laura's head injuries are the worst I've ever seen. We're going to do our best. We've only started to get out bone shards that have penetrated the brain. I want you to be prepared because it's going to take a long time."

I manage to get back to my chair and close my eyes. *The worst head injury I've ever seen.* The words keep spinning through my head. The doctor seems so young; maybe he hasn't seen many head injuries. *The worst head injury.* Think of something else. Anything. Palm Sunday. The long reading of the Passion. I always hate that

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reading. I think of Laura's blood, and the tearing of her scalp, like the crown of thorns. Christ died to save the world. But where's the meaning in her suffering? What possible reason could God have to make her suffer and die?

Right before we took our vows in the convent, we had to make a crown of thorns and put it in a decorated wooden box. The crown was supposed to be meaningful, something about Christ's suffering, or our sacrifice to serve him, or some message that I apparently missed. Most of my class took it as a joke, a show and tell, and decorated our boxes with flowers and bright colors. What a silly fake thing, made by teenagers who had never suffered anything in our whole lives. Laura's crown of thorns is real.

I start making deals with God, desperate to make Him real to me.

"If you let her live, I'll do anything for you. I'll never doubt again. I'll believe in you forever." Laura's life is in God's hands, so I have to be careful. What if I don't really believe strongly enough and he lets her die? God wouldn't do that, I tell myself quickly. But he let her get attacked by a mountain lion. I'm confused, but try to push away all my doubts for Laura's sake.

Why is this happening to us? We're good parents. The kids are never out of my sight. We wear seat belts and I would never have a gun in the house. I don't even let Laura play alone out in the front yard.

David is swinging his legs next to me. I put my hand on his arm, glad he's there with us, and he looks up from a magazine. Suddenly, I think of the little boy

down the street. What's his name? His mother lets him run wild. I've seen cars swerve to miss him. He comes up to our house to play, but Laura doesn't like him, and I don't want her playing with him. I'm too careful with Laura. And now he's fine and Laura is dying. What did I do wrong? Finally, my eyes sting with tears.

Dr. Weiss walks in and sits next to us.

"The back of your daughter's eye was badly torn. That's why the pressure was low. I've repaired it, but only time will tell if the surgery's a success."

"How did it get torn?"

"The tooth of the mountain lion must have torn the back of the eye." He shakes his head. He leaves the room, but leaves me with that horrible image.

Maybe God is punishing me for leaving the convent. What a stupid thought. I quickly dismiss it. My God is kind and loving, not cruel. Then why did He let this happen? If He is all-powerful, He could have prevented this. It would have been simple for Him. Maybe God isn't who I think He is.

I had joined the convent to discover God. Ever since I was little, I had wondered about what God was like. By my senior year, the church was changing—a new pope, an ecumenical spirit, social activism, and finally, rights for women. The convent seemed like the Peace Corps, only better.

I remember that first day in the convent, full of anticipation. An old brass school bell rang out across the green lawns overlooking the Mississippi River. The August sun beat down on my family as we said our final goodbyes and gave hugs all around. I loved my mom

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and dad and sisters, although hugs were unusual. Political discussions were more the norm. Clutching my small suitcase, I waved goodbye as I stepped through the towering wooden doors. The doors closed slowly, blocking out the light as my eyes tried to adjust to the sudden darkness.

In all the six years I was in the convent, I never discovered God.

I move around in the vinyl chair, trying to find a comfortable position. I see the lion when I close my eyes, so I open them and stare at the clock. The second hand sputters its way around the face and when I look up only five minutes has passed.

I lean over to pick up a magazine. Hair and nail ads and movie stars splash across the pages. I throw the magazine down and lean back against the green wall, feeling sick.

Don's eyes are closed. I wonder, as usual, what he's thinking. He's only thirty-nine, but he looks old and tired. His round face has lines I've never noticed. There are a few grey hairs in his beard and moustache. He is always hard to read and has often been depressed. Now he's even further away and we sit silently across the wide room.

Linda's husband offers to take David to stay with their two boys. David's restless, sitting with us for hours. He's worried about Laura but he's only nine. Don and I hug David tightly before he goes. I know he'll be fine.

Linda touches my arm. "Do you want to go outside for a while?" I think the fresh air will help. I look at

Don. He's sitting silently, staring at the wall. I can't even worry about what he's feeling. I can barely feel anything. I put my hand on his shoulder. He looks up at me, startled, and I tell him about going outside. He barely nods.

Linda and I walk down the dimly lit corridors and out the front door. I lean on a rusted railing wet with dew. The parking lot is desolate and lonely, a darkness spreading out to the road beyond. The night sky is a dark blue with pinpoints of stars. The moon has risen over the horizon but the light barely illuminates the darkness.

"I don't understand why God lets things like this happen," I say out loud to the night.

Linda shakes her head sadly. "I don't know. I asked myself that when my sister died, and when Becky's husband died in the helicopter crash. But I think there's a reason, even though we don't know what it is right now."

It's true, I suddenly realize, as guilt washes over me, that all these people I know and work with have troubles of their own. I never talked to our fellow choir member Becky about her husband's death, only a few short years ago. They were newly married and he was a Marine. I never once asked about Linda's sister. I close my eyes, realizing too much at once.

"I used to believe in God so strongly when I went in the convent," I ramble on, trying not to think about my insensitivity, "but now I just don't know what to believe anymore. I believe in God, but what kind of a

God can let horrible things happen to little children like Laura?”

“I don’t know,” Linda says. “I really don’t know.”

I watch the black sky for a few more minutes. If God will let Laura live, I’ll never question Him again my whole life. I vow to do whatever he wants. I don’t know what he wants. I’ve never known. We walk back to the waiting room.

Monday, March 24

The hospital is dark and quiet at three in the morning. I sweep down the long corridors of my life, looking in doorways dark and silent, trying to find that one moment where God was real to me. There had to be a time when I was sure of his presence, when I knew he had answered a prayer, or had spoken to me. If I can find that moment, then maybe Laura will live.

I see the blood orange sun rising over the Mississippi River so many years ago, and how I marveled that it was God’s work. When I touched my baby’s feather-soft face for the first time, I thanked Him for the miracle of birth. I had prayed in stained glass cathedrals, monuments to those who had felt his presence. The final chords of Bach would leave me in tears at God’s beauty. Laura would run so fast into my arms, and laugh as we tumbled over on the grass.

But those were all moments when I pushed God into the picture. He wasn’t really there. Why can’t I find one real moment of God in my whole life? One second where he was actually present, not just in my

imagination? My mind slips and falls. I can't find him anywhere.

Now I look up at our friends Cindy and Roger, sitting together across the room. Cindy, as always, is alert and ready to help. Roger leans his head back against the wall, his eyes closed. Don met Roger at work years ago, and we've known them since our boys were babies. Linda sits next to me, and Don on my other side. I want to take his hand, but he seems so far away. My family doctor and his wife, whom I barely know, sit across the room and wait with us. It's been ten hours. No one has anything to say. I want to thank them, but I don't know what to say.

A small man in green hospital scrubs walks into the room. I struggle to remember his name as he bows. Watanabe. That's it. He's the plastic surgeon. Don and I get up, my legs stiff under me.

"Laura's still in surgery, but my part is finished for now. Her skull was crushed in many places. It took over 900 stitches to close the wounds to her head and face." *Nine hundred stitches! That's impossible.* "Many tendons and nerves in the face still need to be repaired. We repaired her sinuses but there will need to be more surgeries. There is an area where there is only the dura, the membrane that covers the brain. There is no skull there to cover it." *How can she live like that? I don't understand.* "Hopefully we can put a metal plate in her skull soon, to cover that area..."

I have to sit down and Don listens to the rest of what Dr. Watanabe has to tell us.

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What does Laura look like right now? They wouldn't let me see her. All I remember is Don's red flannel shirt wrapped around her head, the blood dripping. I touch my blood-stained shirt. Her blood, dried and brown.

I see Laura in my mind now, her golden hair framing her ivory face. Her face round like Don's, her lips full. She pushes her way through life, never stopping. Screams of delight or tears of anger. Nothing in between. David thinks and chooses carefully, full of quiet. Laura grabs life and shakes it. She always knows what she wants.

When I was pregnant with Laura, I wondered how my two children could be different. David was such an easy, happy child. I couldn't imagine anyone else. But Laura grabbed our lives and sent them spinning from the moment she was born. *Over nine hundred stitches. It's not possible.*

At four in the morning, Dr. Shannon, Laura's pediatrician, comes out of the surgery and asks if we want to sleep for a while.

Sleep? No, I don't want to sleep. I never want to sleep again. I manage to say out loud, "No, I want to be here when Laura comes out of surgery." Don agrees. Dr. Shannon puts his hand on my arm gently and asks me to come out to the corridor. We stand in the darkened hall, tiny fluorescent lights flickering overhead. He's sure of what he's going to say.

"You have to get some sleep. You have to be there for Laura when she gets out of surgery. Go ahead. You need to do this for her, not for yourself."

SUSAN MATTERN

I stand awkwardly, wanting to lean against the wall. My arms feel detached. I don't know whether to fold them or let them hang. Dr. Shannon takes me down the twilight halls into a small, dark room where the doctors sleep on a hard exam bed in the middle of the room. I lie down on the unfamiliar antiseptic sheets and close my eyes, knowing I can't sleep.

All I can see is the attack, the blood, the thin man with the stick, the stream, the lion. But apparently I do sleep, because suddenly a huge mountain lion is running toward me. The eyes are blank and evil. It towers over Laura and I can't stop it. I wake up, my heart pounding. The darkness is all around me.