

FELLINA
MY TRUE STORY
by Osha B. Reader

For all my human friends who know what animals really are.

I was the love of her life, her best friend, her child. I lived as a deer and experienced things that no other deer has experienced. In my time here, though ended too soon, I learned a lot about what people are and what love is. This is my true story.

Osha, my human mother, has a retreat high in the Sierra Mountains of California. She calls it Origin, a place of new beginnings. There are many stories to tell about the years she has lived there but mine is one she'll never forget. If you have time to listen, I'll tell it to you.

It was the summer of 1971 and Osha had been at Origin for almost a year. She used to buy goat milk from a young couple, Mickey and Nancy, who lived in the valley and kept goats in a corral nearby. One day when she stopped in to get some milk, Mickey brought out a tiny fawn, which was me. Their children had named me Fellina. Osha had no way of knowing then how I would change her life.

They had found me on the highway near Quincy, California. Coming around a corner, they'd seen my mother lying on the road. I was curled up by her belly, hungry and scared. My mother had been hit by a car and had died just moments after giving birth to me. In a short while, I would have starved to death if a car had not run over me first. Fortunately, the next car pulled over.

As the two humans approached, I knew somehow I had to trust them. Nancy knelt down beside me, then picked me up gently and carried me home on her lap. She had worked for a

veterinarian in the valley and knew about taking care of animals. She knew that cow's milk will kill a fawn so she'd warm up milk from their goats and feed me from a bottle with a rubber nipple made for newborn calves. They let me sleep in their bedroom because there were dogs outside that could chase and hurt me.

When Osha first saw me, I was a week old, very little and covered with spots. When Mickey put me into her arms, Osha almost cried. She said, "If you ever need a home for this baby, please bring her to me." It was hard for her to hand me back.

A week later, Mickey and Nancy brought me up to Osha's house. They said she should raise me since the highway and the dogs made the trailer park too dangerous. Origin is a quiet and private place, full of sunshine, grass, tall trees and pure, fresh water. It felt like home. Osha held me close and put her cheek against my face. I felt her heart and trusted her instantly.

Nancy gave Osha some gallon jars of goat milk and showed her how to warm it up and feed me. Osha made a bed of sheets and towels for me in the entry to her house but the first night I slept in the corner of her room upstairs. In the morning, she carried me downstairs and introduced me to Gopi.

Gopi was a golden retriever puppy with a sweet face and beautiful wavy fur. Normally, deer and dogs are not friends but Gopi and I became best friends and would sleep together on the back porch outside the kitchen door. A couple of years later, when I'd become a very big deer, the game warden told Osha he'd been driving on the road near her house and had seen a dog chasing a deer. A little way up the road he saw the deer chasing the dog. People have their own ideas about what gets to chase what but they are not always right.

Once I climbed into the game warden's truck. He took off, with me in the passenger's seat. When I got tired of riding, I

jumped out the window and ran back to the house. The game warden was very surprised.

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After the first few days at Origin, I spent most of my time outside. Four or five times a day, when I needed milk, I'd come to the back door squeaking with my front legs up on the glass and the hairs on the end of my tail sticking out like a bottle brush. Osha would rush to warm up the goat milk, testing the temperature on her arm, and I would drink it as fast as I could. I never thought about food until I was really hungry.

She fed me with a bottle for three and a half months, about the length of time my mother would have nursed me. She weaned me from the bottle by placing a bowl of milk on the porch and putting her hand in it with one finger sticking up. I'd suck on her finger then she'd take her hand away slowly and I would drink the milk.

Soon I started eating wild plants from the forest and grass and flowers from the meadows around the house. I loved the ripe gooseberries that grew around the property in autumn. They were red and tart and had prickles all over, like little briars. Osha could never understand how I could eat those gooseberries without hurting my tongue, but deer have very tough tongues.

I also liked digging up wild mushrooms and juicy plant roots and helped Osha learn which plants were good to eat and which were not. Deer have a natural feeling for things like that. When Osha would be working in the kitchen or at her desk and would see me in the meadow, she'd drop everything and come sit by me. She loved my breath, which smelled like fresh green plants...dandelion greens, mullein and yarrow. She loved the way I'd sniff the different currents of the air that layer, one on the other, like a pastry. Sometimes we'd spend hours nibbling plants and hanging out together. I couldn't get enough of looking at her. To me, she was a very special human. She was my human.

I especially liked dried black figs and Mother's Oatmeal cookies and would run out of the forest when Osha called me for treats. Deer also like to eat cigarettes but she wouldn't let anyone feed me those. She wanted me to live a long time and if cigarettes kill people, they probably kill animals too.

Osha called dogs "woofies" but I didn't think they were cute. Even the little ones wanted to eat me. Gopi seemed more like a deer to me than a dog. When I'd see another dog, I'd fluff myself up big then go up to it and try to look scary. Usually, it would back off. Dogs are easy to bluff. Sometimes my strategy didn't work, as you'll see later.

Osha used to raise white cats with long fur and green eyes. I liked the cats and would help her brush them by licking them with my big tongue. They'd lick me with their little tongues and we'd chase each other around in the grass. They were not afraid of me, even though they were so little. Cats are smart enough to know that deer are vegetarians, like deer are smart enough to know that dogs are not.

I loved grownups but I wasn't sure about little children. I wouldn't let them close enough to get hold of me anywhere, in case they'd grab for my nose or my ears. Still, I was curious about them so I'd stretch my neck way out and creep up close and sniff. Then I'd run in a big circle through the woods but never so far that I couldn't see the little one through the trees.

Frisbee was my favorite game. I'd get between two or three people who were tossing the frisbee back and forth and make wild leaps in the air as it flew over my head. Sometimes I'd land facing the opposite direction from where I'd left the ground. The people would laugh so much they'd almost fall down. I was kind of graceful and kind of klutzy, like my human mom. People sometimes tell her she reminds them of a deer.

I was a good swimmer. Osha didn't know I could swim until one day she was in the rowboat on the lake and saw me paddling

towards her. It's embarrassing to admit, but deer swim a little bit like dogs. I was hoping to get in the boat with her, so I'd swim around and around it until she went to shore, but she never let me get in.

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In the early summer of my second year, David Hiser, a photographer for National Geographic, stopped by Origin. He was working on an article called "The Lost Sierra" and took a lot of photographs. In the September, 1973, issue, there's a picture of me lying on the door mat and another of a retreat going on inside the house. David said he usually had to track a deer for days to get a good photograph but had trouble getting far enough away from me to take a picture. I liked the cookies he gave me and you never know when a human might have a cigarette in his pocket.

Many different people come to Origin, especially in summer. They sit and talk together and sometimes they keep silent. They laugh and cry, cook food and later they dance. Osha loves her work and I helped her as much as I could, which some people said was a lot.

Once a couple came to teach a class in herbal medicine. There was a tall black man named Peter, who was sitting in a circle with the group, crying because he was a different color from the others. It seemed like a funny thing to cry about, but humans cry about funny things. The door to the living room was open so I walked in and went around sniffing everyone. I stopped in front of Peter, who had his face in his hands. After awhile, he looked up and we gazed into each other's eyes until he stopped crying, then we walked out into the meadow and down to the lake. Later he said I had healed him. I don't know about that but I was glad he didn't want to cry any more.

During retreats, I'd stay as close to the people as possible. I liked it when they were calm and didn't talk. When they'd go out on walks, I'd go with them, around the lake and

up the driveway to the road. Sometimes it seemed like we were floating in space, our bodies moving like one body. When I'd lie next to someone who was meditating in the grass, it seemed like we were even breathing together. It was fun hanging out with my friends at Origin and with campers up at the Pass, who'd give me treats I wasn't supposed to have. I was well loved and well treated by everyone. Almost everyone.

In the fall, Osha would tie bright ribbons around my neck and feed me extra figs and cookies so I'd stay close to the house. Once I heard a loud noise and found out later it was from a long stick people use to shoot animals with. I heard they sometimes kill animals and then eat them. This was hard for me to understand since there are so many good things to eat that don't mind. I didn't want anyone to eat me, that's for sure! I just wanted them to pet me. Most people don't know how much a deer can love if someone is patient enough to tame it. I never understood how a human could shoot something with eyes so much like theirs. People do crazy things sometimes.

I liked to close my eyes and lay my head in Osha's hand while she stroked my ears. I'd lean against her with the weight of my body and she would lean back. Osha loved me like she would have loved her own child, if she'd had one. I was her child and she was my mother, as much as we ever were anyone's.

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My first winter, Osha didn't know I was supposed to migrate to a lower altitude. Gopi and I would sleep together in a bed of alfalfa on the covered back porch and Osha would feed me Omolene from the feed store, carrot pulp from her juicer and bags of old lettuce greens that the local market would donate. Still, I got pretty thin.

One winter day, I was lying on the front deck getting covered up with snow. The deeper the snow got, the less the wind could blow on me. It was like being in a cave. Osha was looking at me from the window and was amazed to see how I

didn't mind getting buried in snow. When it was up to my nose, I stood and shook myself off. For a deer, life is simple.

In February, Osha invited a friend from Tahoe to visit but she didn't know he was going to bring his big red setter. I knew I was in trouble as soon as that dog got out of the truck. My thin legs and sharp little hoofs made it hard to get around in deep snow, but I started running for the house. The dog took off after me. Suddenly, he was on me. I felt a sharp burning in my leg and was filled with fear, but kept running as fast as I could.

Lucky for me, Osha happened to look out the window and opened the door, just in time. I dashed inside as the dog stood barking at the door. We were both shaking and Osha was feeling me all over to see if I was hurt. She let out a cry when she saw the big bite on my leg. Mickey and Nancy came up and put some Bag Balm on my wound then taped a bandage over it, which Osha changed every day. The old carpenter who worked on the house came by a few days later. He said I'd never be able to run again and then he offered to shoot me! Osha said, "You'll have to shoot me first!" I recovered fully and fast.

The next summer, another thing happened with a dog but this time it turned out better. It was a furry white huskie who came onto the land with some campers. As soon as that dog saw me, he started after me. Dogs are so impulsive! I didn't waste any time. I was bigger and faster now and my feet were on solid ground. I raced for the house, the dog close behind. Then I made a desperate move. I ran up the steps onto the deck and jumped through a closed window. My thick fur kept the glass from cutting me. Some friends were sitting in the living room, reading and playing music, and I sailed right over the head of one of them. The window glass flew everywhere but no one was hurt. The dog stood outside on the deck, disappointed.

I loved listening to music, especially Dave Mason's "Alone Together." When I'd hear it playing, I'd come in and lie down on the rug, the way a deer does, by kneeling on one front knee and then the other, then plopping over sideways. Osha would lie

next to me and cuddle with me. I was her baby, but I was a big baby now.

I did have one bad habit - peeing on the big living room rug. Osha quickly learned that when I started to squat down, it meant I was getting ready and she'd scoot me outside before I could do it. There was no pulling me by my head, though. I'd brace my legs, squinch my eyes shut and refuse to move. I hated it when someone tried to make me do things I didn't want to do. Osha learned to steer me by pressing on my neck with one hand while gently pushing me along with the other. Soon I figured out that peeing in the house was not okay. The wooden kitchen floor was very slippery. My hoofs would slide everywhere, which made it hard to jump up on Osha to get the treats she'd offer me. She'd have to lean the weight of her body against me so I wouldn't push her down. We probably weighed about the same but I still felt like a little deer inside.

The waterbed was my favorite place to rest. It was in Osha's room, where I spent my first night at Origin. Even when I was full grown, I'd run up the stairs like a cat and curl up for a nap. Deer sleep mostly during the day. The bed was warm and comfortable, like the belly of a big mother. Osha was afraid I might punch through the rubber mattress with my hoofs, but I never did. It was my bed too.

Summer was my favorite season but, like everything, it didn't last. At the beginning of my second winter, I stayed around long after the other deer had migrated. Osha knew I played with the wild deer in the forest but when the snow started to fall and food was hard to find, I still didn't want to leave. By then, she'd learned that high elevation in snow country is no place for a deer in winter, with or without human friends, so she took me on a trip in her car.

She took me to the house of her nearest neighbors, a Mexican Indian family called Precciado, who lived in the valley below Origin. The daughters were in their late twenties, about Osha's age, and had animals of their own. I made friends with

the Precciado cats and even worked it out with the dogs. I taught them respect by stamping my feet at them if they got too close. They soon learned that the sharp hoofs of a deer are nothing to play games with. After awhile, I noticed that they didn't want to chase me any more and I even thought they started to look a bit like deer.

It was a wonderful winter. After a few weeks with my new family, I went off with the herd that moves down each fall from the meadows near the Pass. I made a lot of friends and when the snow started to melt, I met the handsome buck who would be the father of my children.

After that winter, I learned to migrate on my own. In late autumn, when the snow began to fall again, I'd go off with the deer herd to lower ground, where food was more plentiful. In spring, I'd come back to the Precciado's, then up to Origin as the summer grass came in. Deer almost always come back to the place where they grew up.

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Late one spring, Osha was driving home through the valley and saw the first double rainbow she had seen in her life. She didn't even know double rainbows existed. People don't pay as much attention to what's around them as animals do. She decided it must be some kind of good omen. When she drove past the Precciado's, she saw me by the roadside eating grass. She pulled over and came up to me, excited to see me because of how long I'd been away, but I just kept eating. Humans make a bigger deal about time than animals do. We know that in our hearts we're always together and that being separated is something the mind makes up when it needs to feel lonely.

Osha got down beside me and put her arms around my neck, her face against my face. She was so happy to see me she was almost crying. She said, "Fellina, the grass has grown in at Origin. You can come home." A few hours later, she saw me in the meadow. She dropped what she was doing and ran outside, as if it were some kind of miracle that I'd understood what she had said, but I understood perfectly. After all, she talked to

me a lot. People are silly but I loved them anyway and it was true what she'd said about the grass. I kept on eating while she stroked my soft ears and hugged my big body.

One day late that summer, Osha was sitting with me and my young fawn by the edge of the lake near the teepee. It was sunset and there was golden light in the fir trees up on the ridge above the lake. She was sitting with her arm across my back, enjoying the evening sky and gazing at my fawn. Suddenly she thought, "I wish I could touch you!" My baby raised its head and looked into her eyes. Then he took two big steps towards her and pressed his cold little nose against her cheek and then stepped back, still looking into her eyes. Osha burst into tears. She understood then how much I trusted her.

The last summer of my life, I had three babies, late in the season. Osha would watch us playing in the yard, my little ones frolicking by the edge of the lake. One of them was a buck and the other two were does. Bucks are more stocky and square and more aggressive in their play. Big deer make a low grunting sound when they talk to their children and the little ones make high squeaks. I would hide them in different places in the forest and go off to graze until late afternoon, then gather them up again in the evening. I liked being a mother.

That fall, Osha painted my ribbons with the words, "God bless you. Don't shoot me!" She was hoping the ribbons would save my life.

Deer hunters were not her friends. They'd drive around in their pickup trucks with their gun racks on the back and shoot at squirrels, ducks, rabbits and sometimes each other. When they'd come near Osha's house, even in the middle of the night, she'd get out her father's old shotgun, which made a lot of noise, and start firing at the sky until they left. Each year before deer season, she'd put signs around the edges of the forest to warn people not to hunt there. Each fall, she was afraid for my life. It's against the law to shoot a female deer or a baby, or to hunt on private land, but people sometimes break the law.

In the mountains, snow was starting to fall, frosting the yellow aspen leaves and bending the tall meadow grasses to the ground. The bright ribbons Osha had tied on me for hunting season were fading. I remember the last time I saw her. She was working at the kitchen table and I was outside on the deck. I looked at her for a long time and she looked at me, then I turned and wandered off into the woods.

About a week later, her mother came to visit. It was Halloween and the last day of deer season. Osha was worrying about me because she hadn't seen me that whole week. She thought I might have moved my babies to lower ground but it was a little too early in the season for us to leave.

I'd been spending some time alone, feeling my life. Fresh snow had fallen the night before, freezing the last wild flowers and glistening like stars on the autumn grass. I was in Osha's thoughts that night and in her dreams. The next morning, her mother woke up and said, "We need to take a walk." They put on their shoes and jackets and headed across the road. Osha gathered some gooseberries along the way and put them in a plastic bag. They started up the hill on the other side of the road and then, by a patch of alders, she saw me. I was lying motionless in the cold grass, a clean round hole through my neck. There was no life behind my eyes. The gooseberries dropped to the ground as Osha fell on my body, sobbing uncontrollably.

She looked helplessly around, hoping somehow to catch one last glimpse of me, but there was only the body in which I no longer lived and the hole from the rifle bullet that had taken my life. The bullet had gone in one side and out the other, puncturing my windpipe and leaving me to gasp for breath until I suffocated. In her grief and despair, Osha saw clearly that this was the body of the deer she had loved, but it was not me. I was nowhere and everywhere.

When the bullet passed through me, I couldn't believe something so terrible was happening, but it didn't last long.

The fluids from my dying breaths threaded like silk webs through the grass where my body lay. In the new snow were three running hoof prints, the last steps I ever took, in the direction of the house and of my killer, whom I didn't know to fear. No human had ever hurt me but this one had shot me from the road and then had just driven away. Why didn't he take my body to feed his family? It would have given dignity and purpose to my death.

In those painful last moments, I thought of my deer mother and of Osha, who would never again see me alive. I thought of my three babies, hiding in the forest, and longed to look into their eyes and somehow let them know they'd be all right. I thought of the man who had shot me and my heart went out to him as I accepted what, in his ignorance, he had done. I felt them all inside me, then dissolved into light as a peace I had never known filled me and spread out around me.

When I didn't return to my children, they knew they had to take charge of their own survival. They sensed that winter was coming, so they found our herd and migrated soon after to the valley.

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Osha's heart was broken. Her sadness, like that winter, seemed to last forever. I was part of her now but she still didn't feel it. All she could feel was the anger and grief that had taken the place of her love. Then one day, on the edge of spring, somewhere to the east of Donner Summit, she wrote a simple poem and called it "Poem for Fellina." It helped her begin to separate from the pain.

I forgave my killer instantly. Some people don't realize it's not possible to hurt another without hurting yourself and they can't be blamed for things they don't understand. It took Osha a long time to forgive him, though. Finally, she decided he could have mistaken me for a buck, could have not noticed that I was on private land, could have not seen my ribbons, could have...

I don't know if people ever fully heal from such deep losses. I was killed in October, 1975, but Osha still grieves for me. She set up Origin as a private wildlife refuge in memory of me and as a place where wild animals can live in safety. She likes to imagine that the deer who come in summer could be my grandchildren. When she sees them in the meadow, she wants to go out and throw her arms around them, but they are not her deer and she is not their human.

Some people might say that if I'd had the chance, it would have been better to have been a wild deer. For me, it's not so. I wouldn't trade the magical life I had for any other.

Osha always said that life is precious, a chance to understand, to grow and forgive. She would say, "Time passes quickly. Don't waste a moment on things that don't really matter."

A plane passes overhead and the sound disappears back into where it came from. I am the sound, the plane and the air they move through. A bird sings outside the window, can you hear it? I am the sound of the bird and the hearing. From this clear place, I see death as an end and a new beginning. The body falls away like a shell and we're set free. And in the end, what sets us free is love.

What I would say to you now is, we don't know how much time we have. Love as much as you can.

This is the poem Osha wrote for me. I'm glad she finally understood.

Poem for Fellina

What I loved in you was my own self
You taught me from afar
And now your dear body no longer holds you
I see you as you are, I feel you,
Closer now than ever, we'll never be apart
Through the love that bound us, your great Spirit
Lives inside my heart.

