



The Passage

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First of all, let me tell you a little about myself. I'm what you could call a spur of the moment type of guy. If I sit down and plan something out it never quite goes like I intended. Everything that can go wrong usually does.

I, Billy Joe Deets, am a sucker for most anything that sounds like a good adventure. I was working a maintenance shutdown job at an oil refinery in southeast Texas when I heard the calling. Joe Barnes, a good friend and coworker, was telling me that if I ever got the chance I should go to New Mexico. It seemed that he spent two glorious weeks at a lodge in Glenwood, New Mexico, where there had been horses to ride, trails to hike, and many other activities. In other words, just a wonderful place for a vacation.

Being the sort of person that I am, I was forever seeking new places to go and things to do when I wasn't working. This job had been getting under my skin as well. I was bored and needed a break. Now, here I was looking at some of the most beautiful country on earth. As I looked around at the natural wonder of this land, I knew that only God could have created a place like this.

I arrived at the lodge in Glenwood about mid-afternoon on Wednesday, August 12th. I used the rest of the evening to settle in at my small one room cabin and contemplate the many things I'd planned to do.

I was up before dawn, ate an early breakfast, and asked the cook to make a good size lunch for me to pack. I intended to stay out most of the day hiking and see what all I could find in the surrounding mountains.

Retrieving my backpack, canteen and other essentials, I set out on my exploring adventure. Some wilderness, I thought to myself, as I walked along the heavily trodden path. Probably thousands of vacationers had traveled this same way before I came along to add my own tracks to the trail.

The path I had chosen was steep, but I carefully maneuvered up the well-worn trail until I reached the top. The trail then descended at a steep angle. This up and down puttering went on for several miles, through tall trees of pine and aspen.

I was pretty well exhausted, out of breath from the high altitude and my legs were feeling rubbery, when the trail came to an abrupt halt at a solid rock wall. The trail then turned left along the mountain escarpment. There was, however, a faint trace of a path that led to the right. I started down the well-used left hand trail. But, as I walked along, something seemed to pull at me to go the other way.

Being the type person that I am, I turned around and started down the right hand trail. I couldn't have gone more than a quarter mile before the trace of trail fizzled out. I then realized that it would be dark in a few hours. My mind wanted me to do the sensible thing and go back to the lodge. But something else inside of me urged me to keep exploring this way, even though the faint trail had played out.

As far as I could see, the side of the mountain on my left was still a solid wall of rock. Yet, there seemed to be some stunted cedar growth along a crevice about fifty feet above where I stood, studying the face of the mountain. I shrugged my shoulders and proceeded to look for a way up to where the cedars grew. Something in my inner being kept tugging at me to investigate. After all, wasn't I the one that was bored with my life and wanted to go adventure hunting?

Above me I saw the semblance of a ledge maybe a foot wide. I carefully climbed the almost sheer wall to the ledge, using cracks and roots for hand holds to get there. I then began inching my way along the narrow ledge, testing each step with my weight as I went. I knew that if I slipped or the shelf gave way and I fell, I would be in serious trouble. It would probably be days before anyone found me, if then. Nobody would know that I had come this way. I doubt that anyone would think to come this far down the little used trail.

When I finally made it to the cedars, I looked back the way I had come and wondered what had possessed me to climb all the way up here. The crevice was deeper than I had first thought. I started working my way towards the back of the cleft, although I knew the light was fading fast. I knew I didn't have long before dark overcame me.

To my surprise I found a narrow opening at the very back, behind the cedars. The opening seemed to go right through the bowels of the mountain. The passage was about

three feet wide at the mouth , and looked like it might even open up wider further in.

"What the heck," I mumbled to myself, "I might as well see where it leads." I thought I might have enough daylight left to make my way through the tool mountain to the other side. If not, oh well. I had already committed myself, so I pulled my backpack off and started down the tight passage. My sensibility was questioning my eagerness as to what I was now doing: with my backpack in my right hand, I managed to squeeze into the tight opening. I was being cautious, feeling my way with every step. After all, this was new territory, and I didn't know what lay ahead. As darkness closed in around me, I freed my flashlight from my backpack to shed more light upon my course. It seemed like I had been working my way through this cramped crevice for quite some time. My muscles were beginning to ache from the stress and physical exertion. With every nerve in my body on end, I continued through the hidden passage.

Finally I could see light up ahead. Now I would see where this portal led. Sweat was clinging to my skin, making me feel uncomfortable. I quickened my steps towards the outer opening. I knew that I wasn't and had never been claustrophobic, but I was certainly glad to be almost out of this narrow passage.

I had to shield my eyes as I stepped out into the light. The sky seemed different somehow, but I couldn't place why or what it was. I had to squint my eyes as they adjusted to the light. As I opened my eyes wide, I could not believe the scene that now lay before me. Was I still in my own world, or had I gone through some type of portal? As I looked out at the vision below me, my only thought was "Paradise."

I'm sure no one would believe me if I were to tell them about this beautiful valley. I then remembered that Joe Barnes had said he would come to meet me at Glenwood when he finished at his job. We had worked together numerous times down through the years and had become close friends, often spending out time together. I thought maybe I should shimmy back through the crack in the mountain, go back to the lodge, and wait for him to show up, bringing him back up here with me.

Yet, something in me didn't really want to share this sight with anyone. Besides, it was growing late. Judging by the sun's position it would be dark before I could make my way

back to the other side.

Then it occurred to me that it had almost been dark when I entered the opening. That's when it struck me. That's what was so different about the sky; the sun seemed higher here. Curious. Maybe it was only because I was now on the west side of the mountain. No matter. I didn't have time to go back now, anyway. I thought it best to find a place and make camp for the night. I could always make my way back in the morning. Besides, I couldn't keep my eyes off the beauty of this place. I was mesmerized. A thought passed through my mind that I must be dreaming. I pinched myself, and it darn well hurt, so I decided I was awake and it all must be real.

In the setting sun, the valley radiated vividly with oranges, blues, yellows, pinks and lavenders. The precious sweet smells of the flowers were so intoxicating, my head felt light. I slid to the ground with my back pressed flat against the mountain wall as the aromatic onslaught overloaded my senses. When my head finally cleared and I felt that I could trust myself to walk again, I got to my feet. Looking around, there seemed to be no end to this enchanting place. As far as my eyes could see there was only beauty.

I spied a stream coming out of one stretch of trees, the water lazily making its way to who knew where. It was almost unnerving. Everything seemed so peaceful. Almost too peaceful.

Instead of making my way to where the stream could be seen, I decided to search for where the stream came out of the mountain. As I walked across an open stretch of ground the thick grass was tugging at my knees. I spied several rabbits, some deer and other animals that I couldn't get close enough to, tell what they were. But wild game seemed to be in great abundance here.

There were also many berry vines scattered around in different patches of various sizes and colors. I also saw what looked like fruit trees closer to the forest area. I stopped at one berry patch, and when I saw how big, fat and juicy they looked I had to sample a few of them. After I had eaten all I wanted, I picked enough of the fruit to fill my hat for later on.

When I found the headwaters of the stream, I was surprised to see that it fed several

rock tanks before the overflow ran down into the stream.

As I looked around I saw that there was an abundance of dry wood to use for my fire. I quickly gathered up several arm loads of wood and then drug several larger pieces that could be broken up later back in my chosen campsite. I found enough stones to ring my fire with. I did not want to take any chance that my fire might get out and destroy this lovely place.

I had brought sandwiches from the lodge with me, and had only eaten a few as I had hiked. I still had a couple, but decided to save them in case of an emergency. After exploring around to the lower pool, I removed my clothes and jumped in to wash the dried sweat from my tired body. When I entered to pool, the cold water nearly took my breath away. There were also lots of fish swimming around, and I scooped a couple of them out onto the bank. Using my shirt to dry off, I donned my clothes. After I cleaned the fish, I collected some clay from the bank of the stream and caked a thick coating around them. I placed the coated fish close to the coals of my fire, covering them with coals. The hot coals would cook my meal slowly.

It was now dark and cool, the fire was welcome; both for the warmth and for my peace of mind. The firelight was enough to see what lay around me as the darkness engulfed this unbelievable, beautiful valley.

This valley I had found was strange, and I did not know what lived within it. There was just enough strangeness about the place to make my skin prickle. As I continued to admire my surroundings, there was the rustle of many small animals as they scurried to and fro in the thick brush.

I took my cup to where the cold, clear water trickled out of the rocks and down into the first pool, drank and refilled it with the clean water. That way, I needed not make so many trips back to the spring.

When I got back to my fire, the clay had baked hard around the fish. I knew that they would be done by now. Using my fork and knife, I eased them out of the coals to cool a little before I attempted to peel the clay from them.

Tomorrow would be a new day and I'd go back through the crack in the mountain wall and return to the lodge. My friend Joe should be there by now, all checked in. He would be wondering where I was at and what I was up to. Joe and I had gone on several adventures together and he was real handy to have around. I figured that after I got back to the lodge, had a good night's sleep and re-provisioned, including a sleeping bag, I'd bring Joe to this valley and we could explore it completely.

That was one good thing about not being married. I could work, save my money, and then take several weeks a year to go exploring the country without having any one else to answer to. If I had married, I would probably be deep in debt and with several kids to keep me busy. No, I liked my life just the way it was.

The fish had cooled and I peeled the clay off. The scales of the fish came off with the clay, leaving pretty white meat behind, and when I put that first bite into my mouth, I knew that I must be in heaven. I couldn't remember when I had tasted anything so good. I also finished off the berries that I had gathered earlier.

I added a few sticks of wood to my fire, settling back for the night. Earlier I had raked up some leaves in a pile to use for bedding. I was hoping that the weather would stay as nice as it was, warm and clear.

Sometime during the night, I drifted off to sleep. The day had been long and I had done more, and gone farther than I ever had before. I was especially tired since I was not used to this mountainous terrain nor the thin air at this altitude.

When I had fallen asleep the night had been quiet. Then suddenly, all hell seemed to break loose! I sat up straight, chills engulfing my body. I grabbed for the only weapons I had, my hatchet and survival knife. Frightened beyond anything I had ever known before was the loud noise that had come from somewhere out in the valley. It was somewhere between a roar and a hideous scream. Whatever it was, it couldn't have been human. I had never heard an animal make such a shrill sound as had woken me. I couldn't exactly pinpoint the spot it came from, this was such a vast valley; some of it was heavily timbered forest, but most of it was meadows with thick grasses and many types of

flowers.

Watchful now as the night drew on, still clutching my weapons, I couldn't help drifting off to sleep again. It was a dazed sleep, half awake and half asleep. I could hear the bushes moving in my semi-dozing state. Was it the wind or my imagination? Could something, or someone, have been stalking my camp, perhaps to kill me? Maybe it, or they, were just curious as to what I was? It could be that they had never seen a creature as me. I felt sure that those repulsive snarls, growls, roars, screams or whatever they were, were done by more than one creature. Of that I was deadly certain.

I decided that once the sun came up, I would do some scouting around my camp. There was the possibility that I would find where the things passed during the night. But for now, I put more wood on the hot coals, stirred my fire back to life, and waited for daylight. I eased close enough to the fire to feel its warmth, gaining a sense of security from the light. I dozed off.

When I woke, the sun was up and I could feel its warm rays on my face. Checking my watch, it was almost eight o'clock. Mentally, I said a few choice words for allowing myself to sleep so soundly. Physically, I felt energized and refreshed.

Splashing my face with cold water, now with a clear head, I moved about the outer perimeter of my camp looking for any sign of what had passed in the night. The farther out I went, the more aware I became of a lingering smell of something dead or rotting. I also found a few hairs scattered about on the limbs of the bushes where some creature had brushed against them. These hairs were a mixture of colors; brown and silver or gray. I gathered some of the hairs and knew definitely where the smell of decay had come from. It belonged to the creatures I had heard in the night.

After I was satisfied that whatever had been stalking about in the night was no longer close by, I went back to my camp. However calm I seemed on the outside, on the inside I was a bundle of nerves. I jumped at almost every sound from the forest around me, big or small.

I packed my gear as quickly and quietly as I could and put out my fire, making sure I covered the coals with a couple of inches of dirt. Although there were things here that I didn't understand, I didn't want to see the beauty of this place destroyed by fire.

I set out to retrace my path to where the passage went through the mountain. I was almost certain that the passageway was not more than a mile from where I had made my camp. Yet, when I got to where I thought it to be, it wasn't there! Confused, I had no choice but to look farther down the mountain's side.

I walked on for almost two more hours, searching every nook and cranny and still could not find the entrance. I knew that I must have gone by it somehow. In my haste, I had forgotten to fill my canteen with water from the spring. The water in my thermos bottle was gone now, and I was beginning to get thirsty. My stomach began to make slight noises as well. It seemed to me that I had two choices: I could continue on the way I was going and hope to find another way out, or I could go back to where I had made camp the night before. I knew there was fuel, food and water to be had there. If I went back, I could start over in my search for the opening in the mountain. There was one thing for sure, I didn't have long to make up my mind. When I first looked up at the sky, it had seemed normal enough. Yet, now, as I studied further, there was a texture to it. Something definitely wasn't right, and I didn't remember seeing any stars out the night before.

That was when, out of the corner of my eye, I saw movement down in the valley. I could make out two shapes moving around by the stream. As I watched, from this distance and through the thick foliage, I couldn't make out what they were.

They must have sensed being watched, for it seemed both creatures stopped and looked up at the same time and they were both looking in my direction, but it was too far away to tell for sure. I ducked down behind the thick brush and rocks. I could hear what sounded like snarls and growls, as the wind was blowing in my direction. I risked another look. They had started my way!

I knew that I had to backtrack in the direction which I had come. I must have missed the portal entrance somehow, but now I had to find it. The sky seemed to get darker and

gloomier. The sound of thunder rolled through the valley even though there was not a cloud in the sky.

Quickly glancing behind me, I saw dark movements through the trees. The creatures were swiftly gaining on me. That's when I heard my own voice saying, "Dear God, let me find my way to the other side of this mountain." I'm not normally a religious man, but He had my full attention right now.

Moving as fast as I could, I fell more than once, my feet kept getting tangled in the tall grass and weeds. The sound of thunder was getting closer now, and there were streaks of lightening flashing in the darkening, cloudless sky. I hadn't noticed how strange the sky was before, because the valley had been bathed in sunlight. Had it been clear, or had it been this odd color all the time?

When I had first spotted the creatures, or animals, or whatever they were, they had been standing upright like men. They had looked extremely tall, but the distance between us could be deceiving. One thing was for sure, though, I could never remember seeing anything that resembled these large, hairy beasts.

My breath was growing short as I fled towards my old campsite. I didn't know why the idea of the campsite meant safety. I guess I felt that way because I had stayed there overnight unmolested. The creatures had come to check me out, but the main thing was that I hadn't been harmed there.

"Oooff," I muttered as I fell hard, my breath almost knocked out of me. I laid there for a minute, panting, trying to regain my breath. I listened for a minute to see if those things were still coming after me. The sounds I heard now were soft grunts and moans. It was my guess that they had stopped also, trying to locate me lying breathless in the weeds. I knew that they were close, too close. The smell of decay was heavy in the air. I didn't want to guess what they would do with me if they caught me.

With that thought in mind, I lunged to my feet and bolted onward. As I hurried along I could hear those things not far behind me. Looking back over my shoulder, I still couldn't see them, although I knew that they were getting closer by the stench that filled the air around me. What bothered me the most was not knowing what or how dangerous these things were. So far the only damage I had incurred was of my own doing, trying to

escape what I assumed was certain death if I was caught.

I stumbled again, but this time I didn't fall. I caught myself and that was when I saw what I believed to be the passageway. In my desperation, I hurried in that direction. The crevice has been partially hidden by brush. I didn't remember this, but I had to get away quickly and hoped that it was the correct way out.

I was almost out of breath by the time I reached the brush. Sure enough, there was a large crack in the mountain. I had but the one chance to make my escape. I had to go in. These things were closing in behind me, their smell terribly strong now. I was too scared to stop, or even to slow down.

I slipped my pack off while still in a dead run, dragging it in behind me as I entered the passage. I had no idea if those things would follow me through the mountain or not.

It took me most of an hour to worm my way back through the crack in the mountain. Sweat dripped off my brow and I hurt all over. Once clear of the mountain portal, I stopped to listen again. I heard only my own heavy breathing and pounding heart. Had I managed to elude them after all?

I was tired and my knees were weak, but I knew that I must keep moving. I eased my way down the rocky escarpment to the dim path below. My guess was that I still had ten or twelve miles to go before I reached the lodge.

Luckily most of it was downhill.

It was after dark when I stumbled to my cabin door. My friend Joe was standing beside his car when he saw me, noting my rough condition, and came running to see if he could help. I knew I must have looked a sight for him to be so concerned.

"Bill, where have you been?" he asked, "What happened to you?"

"I, I've been in the valley on the other side of the mountain," I told him shakily. "I need water and food." And I needed to clean myself up, checking my scrapes and bruises.

"Joe, I'll tell you all about it, but first I need a drink of water and something to eat."

Joe volunteered to go to the cafe down the road for food while I satisfied my thirst and cleaned up. By the time he got back with the food, I had managed to shower and put on

clean clothes.

The hot food was good. As I ate, I tried to tell Joe about the valley and the strange creatures that lived there. He just looked at me like he couldn't believe what he was hearing.

Finally it struck me, "You don't believe me do you, Joe? You think I'm over due for the looney farm, don't you?"

"Okay," I said, "tomorrow we'll go back to the mountain and I'll show you the passage. Then I'll take you to the valley on the other side. You'll see."

Shrugging his shoulders, Joe finally said, "Okay we'll see your valley in the morning."

I slept fitfully that night. I kept waking up to the frightening sounds of those things in my dreams. I was almost relieved when morning came and I could show Joe that I wasn't crazy. He'd be sorry for doubting me.

Joe and I ate a big breakfast, and we asked the cook to fix a couple of lunches for us. With packs on our backs, we took the well beaten trail that led up into the mountains. About noon we reached the solid rock wall, where the main trail went left along the escarpment, we went to the right, towards the hidden passageway and the secret valley. After two hours we reached the crevice where the entrance had been located. I went first up to the cedar ledge, Joe right behind me.

Pointing the way, I said, "Joe, the portal is right back there."

Joe went in front of me to check it out. He returned shortly, stating, "Bill, there's nothing back there, but a small crack that I can't even fit my hand into."

I pushed past him and sure enough, there was no opening in the mountain. Behind the cedars, there was nothing but solid rock wall with a small fissure running up it.

"I can't believe this," I said. "Joe, I swear to you that..."

The look on Joe's face said it all. He knew that I believed what I had told him was true, but I couldn't prove it now.

Really, I was feeling like a fool. "Joe," I said, "there's got to be an explanation for this."

"Wait!", I exclaimed, a thought suddenly hitting me. "We'll go back to the lodge and drive to the other side of the mountain, and you'll see."

Joe just held up his hand and said, "I believe you Bill. If you said you were in that valley, then you were. I'm not one to dispute your word. It's just when I arrived at the lodge and I was told that you had went hiking up in the mountains the day before, so I thought maybe you went over the top and got lost. Bill, I drove around to the other side and the only thing I found over there was another mountain, no valley at all."

Joe climbed down off the rock shelf first, but before I left I turned back towards the tiny crevice and heard faint sounds coming from within. Were they laughing at me? Was I as crazy as Joe thought I was?

I turned and climbed down to join Joe. Together we started hiking back to the lodge. The questions of that day still bothered me. Had I somehow climbed through a portal to another time or place, or had I just dreamed the whole adventure?