Hear Him Roar
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DINNER

Jean and her son Kyle were in the living room when I arrived. They were sitting on the couch together, she was drinking bourbon and he was having a beer and I could tell by how quiet they got when I walked in that they must be in the middle of one of the heavy pow wows they’d been having a lot of lately. I went into the kitchen and fixed myself a bourbon with ice. When I came back to the living room they invited me half-heartedly to join them, but I said I needed to return Don Mackey’s call. Jean had left me a message by the kitchen phone.

I dialed Don’s house from the den. He picked up after the first ring.

“Jesus,” I said, “you must be sitting on that thing.”

“Sayers, hey.” He sounded keyed up.

“How goes the lion hunt?”

“Not so good. Turns out they had homicide detectives working this thing at first. They found that gal half-buried and all torn up and assumed some nut did it to her.”

“A pretty reasonable assumption.”

“Maybe, but before anybody suggested a predator kill those cops had made a mess of the whole area. The dogs were at a loss today. But tomorrow’s supposed to be better.”

“Why’s that?”

“The lion only ate part of her. They figure it’ll come back soon to finish up. They killed a deer today and put it in the stash spot. They’re hoping for some fresh tracks tomorrow. That’s what I called you about.”

I waited.
“Yeah,” Don said, “you know Cliff Carter, he’s heading the capture team. He invited me to come along tomorrow and said I could bring you.”

“You’re going to drag me into this one way or another, aren’t you.”

“Hey, an office jockey like you? I thought you’d jump at the chance for some action.”

“As it happens I’ve got a little action lined up for tomorrow already.”

“That right?”

I told him I’d be taking the Sutter Heights kids out to fish.

“Sutter Heights?” he said. “Watch out they don’t mug you in the frigging boat.”

“I’ll try my best.”

“Sayers, tell me truly. You think these welfare kids will fall in love with fishing?” From the searching sound of his voice I gathered he had wrestled with this question privately before.

“Haven’t even met them yet. How would I know?”

“It just seems like a dubious proposition to me. Smart fellow like yourself, outdoorsman, seems like your talents could be put to better use.”

“Don’t tell me. I should be going to the barricades with you?”

“Hey, I’m not the only one who sees the size of this thing. Those lion lovers are shitting their britches right now. They know what something like this does to public opinion. This is big stuff, bud. We play it right, this time next year we could be voting to overturn the hunting ban.”

“Even if I wanted to go I couldn’t. Somebody crapped out at the last minute and I promised Emilio I’d fill in.”

“Okay, suit yourself. And Jesus,” he said, laughing a little, “be careful.”

As soon as I hung up I started getting edgy about the fishing trip. Up till now I’d been too dazed to consider how unprepared I was to go out in a boat with a couple of probable delinquents from
Sutter Heights. What if they did pull something? I was inching my way toward serious agitation when it dawned on me that I could maybe take Jean along. For twenty-five years she’d been teaching third grade in the next neighborhood over, which was going to pot. She made a living handling disadvantaged kids. I could look after the fishing end of it while she made sure the boys behaved. The more I thought about the idea the more I liked it. Here was a chance for us to collaborate on something besides dinner.

God knows such chances had gotten scarce. According to her this was entirely my fault, and even in my own mind I was eighty percent to blame. Six months before, after a long and reasonably slow decline, I’d started neglecting altogether my bedroom duties. This in itself was not such a major problem. Jean likes nothing better than a crusade, and for a while there reviving my moribund passion looked like a campaign we could wage together. In her mind there are two classes of ailments, those aspirin will cure and those it won’t. My problem was of the second sort. That meant it could be traced back to some slipped disk in my emotional backbone. I was avoiding something, failing to reconcile myself to one of life’s grim truths. No one could identify the problem for me, I had to do this myself—it was the crucial first step on the road to recovery. That didn’t mean Jean lacked a diagnosis, however. Oh no, she knew very well what was wrong with me. She had been reading up on it for several months. She would give me the books I needed, with key passages highlighted, but that was all. It was up to me to connect the dots.

When I connected them a curious picture emerged. If a cartoonist were to draw it he might show me wearing saggy shorts and boxing gloves, sitting on the stool in my corner. Out in the middle of the ring, dancing around, acting tough, was a little guy with an R on the front of his shorts—R for retirement. My coach couldn’t understand why I wouldn’t just go out there and hammer the little bugger. I could take him, easy. But my coach couldn’t see what waited for me in the next frame. This match here was only the semi-finals. If I won it, then I’d have to fight the defending
champion, the heaviest hitter of them all, the one who wears a big D on the front of his shorts—D for you know what.

Jean wasn’t so amused by this routine when I tried it out on her. She just told me my wisecracking was another means of avoidance. I admitted she was probably right but asked her to bear with me for a while. She did, for a while. Eventually her patience ran out. It ran out on the day when she walked into the bedroom and found me lying there with her blindfold on and her earplugs in. She gave me a shake, and when I was all unblocked and unstoppered she asked what I was up to. I reminded her of a chapter in Doctor Sell-a-book’s treatise where that shrewd student of the human mind turns the tables on us cowardly menopausal males, claiming that of the two routes we have to choose from, death is the easier and more pleasant road, while life is the steep rocky track. This had struck me as an interesting notion, I told her, and I was now taking an imaginary trip down the death road, to test the good doctor’s claims. In case she had forgotten it, I quoted Wholeness Tip Number One for her: *Study the situation by entering into it.*

When it dawned on her that I was using her gear for my experimental journey, she got mad. She started hollering at me and I hit her with Wholeness Tip Number Three: *Go conscious, not crazy.* That didn’t help much. Neither did bringing up her dad, which was my next smooth move. I never met the guy, but by all accounts he was a first-class turd, worse even than Jean’s ex, who disappeared when Kyle was only five or six. The last turdish thing her dad did was to die suddenly, before Jean got a chance to tell him off. She wasn’t about to let me pull off such a caper. No, I told her, you only want to keep me around so I can take what the old man deserved.

That was a turning point. I didn’t know whether I was absolutely right in what I’d said or absolutely wrong. Either way I had to suffer for it. From that moment on she started treating me like a third-grader who’d stepped out of line. She couldn’t give
me detention, but she found other ways to isolate me while I took time to decide if I wanted to spend the time I had left clowning around, or if I was going to come back to class and apply myself.

That approach would have worked all right if I knew how to apply myself, but in this area I didn’t have a clue. I honestly didn’t. So for more than a month I’d stood with my nose in the corner while Jean turned her full attention to Kyle, who seemed to be soaking it up. I could hear the two of them up the hall right now as I sipped away at my drink. Jean was walking Kyle to the door, and though I couldn’t make out actual words her tone told me she was sending him home with plenty of advice to sort through this evening, and enough encouragement to keep him on the task.

When the door shut behind him I headed out to the kitchen. I arrived there just as Jean was pouring herself another bourbon. She poured me one too, and we worked through these drinks at about the same pace as we prepared dinner. I put a salad together, then went over and leaned against the island so I could fill her in on the mountain lion news as I watched her peeling and crushing garlic, chopping herbs and tomatoes, building a sauce for the lamb shanks we would eat. When she gave me the word I opened the zinfandel so it could breathe.

During dinner we talked mainly about the wine and food. First we commented on each of the flavors by itself, and then on the relationships among them. After that we tried to remember each of the other eleven bottles in the case this one came from: when we drank it, what we ate with it, how that meal had compared to this. We managed to recall half-a-dozen dinners, all of them excellent, but none quite up to the mark we’d set tonight. “The last best,” I said. “It’s fitting.”

“And on Friday night. It should be a little special.”

“Hey, you’re reminding me.”

“Of what?” she said.

“Tomorrow’s Saturday. I took the liberty of making a plan.”

“Hope it doesn’t involve me.”
I’d been leaning back, cradling the last half-glass of wine against my chest, but now I leaned forward and set it on the table. “You busy?”

“I just promised Kyle I’d go with him to a careers seminar. It’s all day tomorrow and Sunday.”

She asked what my plan was and I told her about the fishing trip.

“That sounds like a hell of a deal, Charlie. Sorry I can’t make it.”

“Me too.”

“You’ll be okay without me,” she said breezily, and then looked up at me. “Won’t you?”

“Sure,” I said, unsure.

She set her glass down. “Charlie, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” I looked straight ahead, through the arched doorway into the living room. I felt her studying me. “Charlie,” she said in a soothing voice, “there’s nothing to worry about. You know all there is to know about fishing.”

“The fishing part doesn’t worry me. You know how to handle these kids. I don’t.”

“These kids?”

I waved my hands above the table, still not looking at her. “You know, the backgrounds they have. I’m not that familiar...”

“You’re the one that volunteered.”

“It was an impulse,” I said, too loud. I lowered my voice. “I guess I liked the idea of teaching disadvantaged kids to fish. You make teaching them sound so fun—like a person can, I don’t know, get through.” I folded my hands on the table. “I just wish you could be there to help.”

“You can handle them, Sayers.”

“Sure, I bet it’s easy.”

“It’s not easy working with kids, whatever backgrounds they have. They’re all tough, but not the way you think.” She paused. “Look at me, will you.”
“Why can’t Brenda go to that seminar with Kyle?” I said, turning to her. “She’s his wife, for godsake.”

“Is that a joke? She’s never done a single thing to encourage him. He’s ready to get out of a demeaning work environment and take control of his life, and she could care less.”

“I guess I’ll have to cancel.”
She covered my hand with hers. “Just go out there and be natural, that’s the number one thing. Kids are like animals. They sense when you’re nervous, and they take advantage.”

“Natural?”

“That’s right, treat it like a fishing trip, not a...” She twirled one hand in the air.

“Not a what?”

“Not some big meaningful thing. Some good deed or something. Just bait the hooks and get ‘em in the water. Just fish, for Pete’s sake. That’s what you’re out there for.” She got up and cleared our plates.

After a minute I got up too and headed into the living room to sit in my chair. Pretty soon she came in with the decaf. I wasn’t sure our conversation was over until she cuddled up on the couch with her novel. And then I just sat there sipping, wondering how it was that she could be on the couch like that, lost in her book, and somehow still manage to communicate that if I was interested, she could be just as lost in me. I had to hand it to her. She was not the type to let my lack of interest drag her down. If she had run to fat or quit tending to her appearance in some other way I would at least have had an excuse. But she was still the compact woman I’d fallen for, as fiery and fit as ever. Her breasts were on the small side and still had plenty of spring. Her legs had all kinds of shape. I could see how good she looked but couldn’t feel it anymore, not where it counted.

So I endured this silence, a monster of my own making. Of course a shout would have destroyed it, something dramatic, I could have gotten down on my knees and pledged to try harder. But I felt too old, or too tired. And I guess too content to sit
brooding over my decaf, resenting Kyle, wondering how in the hell I’d manage to be natural tomorrow out in the boat. I didn’t say anything out loud until I stood up and announced I was ready for bed.

When she arrived I was in my pajamas already, lying back on a pile of pillows. I gazed at the ceiling, breathing in the scents of her facial creams and wondering vaguely how they managed to make those products smell so hopeful. She put the earplugs in first. But then she took them out.

“Hey,” she said, “I hope you called Doctor Rhodes about your stomach.”

“You must think I’m pretty far gone, urging the doctor on me.”

“At least he’ll deal with the symptoms.”

“Yeah, well you don’t need to worry. I’m taking care of it.”

“Do I dare ask what that means?”

“Probably not,” I said, flicking a hand at her. “Go ahead.”

The eye-roll she gave me was broad enough to encircle the big empty place where my sense ought to be. She reinserted the plugs. Before sliding the blindfold down from her forehead she leaned across and kissed my head, then waved both index fingers around hers and told me she was checking out.

Eclipsed, black as anything in her fake night, I reached over and turned my light off. In the darkness my mind turned immediately to Val—as if he’d been waiting there all evening, patient as a stone. Tentatively, I placed my hands on my belly. Stillness. Utter quiet.

And I hadn’t even paid him.