Hear Him Roar

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Every day since the jogger’s death a handful of cougar sightings or incidents had been reported to the department, most of them bogus. Cliff Carter’s outfit had nowhere near the manpower it would have taken to check out all these calls. At the same time, they couldn’t afford not to follow up. To overturn the hunting ban they needed evidence of the mountain lion infestation that politicians from a lot of the hill counties were starting to clamor about. Each substantiated lion incident was evidence the Friends of the Mountain Lion couldn’t dismiss.

Don’s job was to scout for Cliff Carter. He would drop in on the people who called in lion sightings and decide whether or not they were legit. If they weren’t, the department hadn’t wasted its time or money investigating. If they were, the department looked into it, and Don had a scoop for the COUGAR ALERT newsletter.

The first time I went out with Don I produced the EnCompass and asked if he would mind holding my PNS for me. Don was susceptible to gadgets. His distaste for my lewd remark was easily overpowered by his attraction to the EnCompass. He mounted it on his dashboard and let it direct us to the homes of those who had called in lion sightings.

The first call we answered together came from a guy who lived deep in the heart of an apartment complex named after the false lake the pricey units faced. From Chet Burns’ place, one row off the lake, you could peer between the two units beyond the carports and see a vertical strip of the unnaturally blue water. But there was plenty of consolation for the eyes inside Mr. Burns’ home. Handsomely photographed birds perched all along the walls
of his apartment. In the entryway I saw a California quail, a cedar waxwing, and a pair of rosy finches, all of them captured in vivid detail and many times larger than life. This Burns was finchlike himself, little and fidgety. When I complimented the photographs he nodded avidly and explained that pictures were his passion.

*How do you hold the camera still?* I felt like asking him. *And why don’t you do something about that breath?* For such a little man, he had big breath.

He left a trail of it for us to follow as he zipped down the hall toward the living room, explaining along the way that his passion had always been for still images only. Video had left him cold. It was to prove this to himself once and for all and to settle an ongoing dispute with a technology-slave friend that he agreed to borrow the friend’s video camera, just to try it out once and show he had an open mind. Yesterday he had gone down to one of his favorite birding spots, on the south bank of the river, to see what the machine could do.

“I wasn’t even that sure I wanted to go,” Burns admitted to us. “Not after what happened to that jogger. But this individual loaned me the camera two weeks ago. I’m not the sort of person who borrows something and then just keeps it.”

Don and I sat on the sofa, and Burns hunkered down near the TV, telling his tale. “So I drive down there and leave my car in the lot. I go walking down the bike trail maybe fifty yards. Then I go off the trail toward this spot where I’ve gotten some of my best shots in the last couple of years. Okay,” he said in the lowered voice of a kid nearing the scary part of his story, “I’m just getting settled on the edge of this clearing when I notice a movement out of the corner of my eye. A *mountain lion!* I turn around, see what it is, and I swear to you the hair stood up on the back of my neck.” He cupped his hand over the spot in question. “I never knew that really happened.”

Don cleared his throat. “How come you didn’t run?”

Burns flicked his chin from side to side, flapping his arms once. “I don’t know? Call it a photographer’s instinct. I must be
crazy,” he said, but I could tell he meant brave. He’d lived through his own Marlin Perkins moment. He was proud.

“Slowly, I lift up my binoculars and get it in focus. God, what a beautiful cat! So graceful. Just walking along, really slow, and graceful, you know. Gosh, what a sight!”

“Is that when you started taping?” Don said, his voice thick with skepticism.

“I realized I had to. It was my duty to get this footage, even if I had to risk my neck for it. So,” the little man said, lifting the control pad, “I lowered the binoculars and took hold of the camera.” The blue TV screen turned brown and green and wavy. “I was still really nervous at this point. That’s why it’s so unstable.”

Gradually the picture stabilized, and as it did poor Burns’ credibility crumbled to pieces. His cat did have the right color hide; it even had the dark tail tip mountain lions have. And there was a family resemblance in the fluid feline walk, in the pointy shoulder bones poking up with each step, in the tail that moved like a wand of thought, in the way it lay down and licked itself and yawned. But when this cat did lie down it was more than half-concealed by the ankle-high autumn grass. To reach cougar stature, it needed magnification to the tenth power. Between them, Burns’ fear of being eaten and his hunger to be noticed had probably doubled that. He’d been primed by two weeks of mountain lions in the media, after all. One look through his birding binoculars was all it took to inflate this house cat into a wild cougar, and his own measly self into a safari lord.

As the tape rolled on my desire to look over at Don warred against my certain knowledge that if I did look, and he happened at the same time to glance at me, our hero would be buried under an avalanche of laughter. So I busied myself trying to figure out the best way to describe this image to Jean when I got home. To duplicate the occasional jolts and sways set off by Burns’ excitable hands, it would be best to set your camera up in a boat on mildly choppy water. Then you’d need to find a tawny tabby to film, give it a can or two of catfood to eat, and leave it to laze in the sun on shore.
“I’m so glad it stuck around for a while,” Burns said after five minutes or so of footage. “Gave me a chance to get settled.”

“How long is the tape?” Don asked.

Awed by his achievement, Burns had stopped fidgeting. He spoke to the screen. “Twenty-seven minutes.”

Here I braced myself, waiting for kid-gloves Mackey to ask this Burns if he had considered the probability of a mountain lion, one of the most shy and stealthy animals on earth, dawdling out into a clearing in broad daylight and then sitting still for half an hour of close-range videography. But the old bone-crusher surprised me, saying only that we didn’t have time to look at the whole tape, and asking Burns to give it to us so we could show it to the experts back at the department.

Burns paused the machine, hopped up, and handed Don a copy he’d already made. “I know this is a public safety issue, and I want to cooperate fully with the authorities on it,” he said. “But as photographer I retain the copyright on this footage, of course.”

“Sure,” Don said.

Once again Burns flapped his arms. “I figure I risked my life, I might as well make something out of it, right?”

Don shrugged. “It’s only fair.”

Back in the truck, after we’d had a good laugh, I asked Don why he’d left the wool over Burns’ eyes.

He said, “That little zero? Let Carter pop his bubble for him. We’re just volunteers.”

“I’m not even that,” I reminded him.

“Oh, what are you then?”

“Just a bored old guy along for the ride. Unaffiliated.”

“Unaffiliated. Is that right?”

“Yeah, for the first time in about forty years. Thought I should try it out a while, see what it feels like.”

I recognized his nod as the one I’ve given to people, almost always younger than me, when they have no idea what they’re talking about. “How’s it feel so far?” he said.

“So far, so good. I’m having fun.”
Don jerked his thumb back in the direction of Chet Burns’ apartment. “That kind of fun I can do without.”

Too bad for him, since there wasn’t any other kind of fun on our menu that week. The second call we answered together was from a fleshy, pink-faced woman who had been riding out on the bike trail, had seen a cougar move in the bushes and then had lowered her head and ridden for her life all the way home, sure that the cougar was right behind her. By the time we got to her house her ride had been over for two hours at least, but you wouldn’t have known this by looking at her. Her cheeks were flushed as if with exertion, her dull blond hair was gathered up in some kind of spring-loaded clamp, and black biking shorts peeked out from under the tail of a big white T-shirt that said BE NICE on the front in black letters. She gave us her report on the front porch, in a voice too urgent for breath.

Her husband had warned her against riding on the bike trail by herself. He would be home before long, she told us, glancing up the street. He would throw fits if he found out about this. Fits. Here her pale eyebrows lifted like the halves of a drawbridge as her face filled with dismay. He’d warned her and she’d gone out there anyway. That, she told us, was the story of her life.

I was ready and willing to hear some of the life story, and I believe she would have spilled it if Don hadn’t pulled out his note-pad and started quizzing her about the cougar.

Would she describe it, please?

Hmm. Well, she’d been so busy trying to get away, she hadn’t stuck around to get a close look. It was mainly a sound, a commotion in the bushes.

Had she seen the animal at all, some part of it? The head, for instance?

Well, she didn’t remember seeing the head—not clear enough to say what it looked like.

Had she seen any part of the animal? Fur, tail, paw? Anything?

No. Well, hmm. Maybe she hadn’t.
I wondered about the words on her shirt. Command, or plea? Either way, Don did his best to comply with them, noting on his pad the exact spot where she claimed the thing had occurred. He told her he’d report everything to the department and have them get back to her if they’d heard about anything else happening in that vicinity.

“You think I’m making it up, don’t you,” she said, the eyebrows drawing up again. “You know what? It wouldn’t surprise me if I was.”

At this Don started to back off the porch. I would have liked to stay a bit, give the woman an ear to pour her troubles into. But Don had caught a whiff of leaked emotion. Nothing in the world could make him flee faster than that. If he was getting out of there, I felt I ought to go with him. Anyhow, it would save her some explaining if we disappeared before the husband got home.

My mood was pensive as I ambled down the steps and along the front walk, thinking about the four people (three of them still living) who knew enough to comment on my own way of reacting to the woes of others. Whatever their differences, Jean, Sadie, and June would all agree that emotional pain is a thing I choose not to be near. At least the pain of those closest to me, pain I worry I might have caused. But it’s different with strangers’ troubles. When I see someone like this woman on the porch, wobbling under too much baggage, I’m likely to step up and offer to carry some of it for her to the curb.

Which means that like a lot of my other flaws, my aversion to intimate things looks mild next to Don’s. I’ve always thought the comedian had good advice for those who want to look thin when he told them to hang around fat people. My own advice to anyone wanting to feel lighthearted would be to go on the road with Don. The feeling I remember more than any other from twenty-five years of road trips with him is my almost constant compulsion to joke and tease. This didn’t come from any deep vein of mirth in me, it was part of my job description, my moral duty to try and tickle Don down off the lonely rock he was always climbing on
to stew. Maybe it was the lying hatchery manager in Eureka, the virus killing the fish in Spoon Lake, the lame ass new guy they’d hired at Yountville. Whatever it was, Don darkened it, which always set me searching for ways to let in light.

I did a little searching as we walked in silence back to the truck. And after we took off I told him I wanted to thank him.

His glance was mistrustful. “For what?”

“Not because I’m learning about mountain lions,” I said. “Haven’t learned squat in that department. But Jesus, Mackey, I never had any idea how fertile the human imagination can be.”

His great head slowly wagged.

“I’m starting to wonder if real mountain lions even exist,” I told him. “Who needs the damn things, with all these imaginary ones roaming around?”

“There’s real ones.”

“For me it’s been two calls, two false alarms. When was the last time you had anything real?”

“It happens. I wish it would happen more.”

“Yeah, like we need more cougars mucking around down here. What the hell do you care, anyway? You stay busy either way. Isn’t that the main thing?”

He shook his head. “The main thing’s getting the law changed. That killed jogger really turned the wind in our favor. We’ve got Dick Beech ready to take this thing to the state legislature. We need to keep the heat on. We can’t let it die down now.”

“What is it with you and this law?” I said. He started to answer and I told him not to bother with the speech about who is going to manage the wildlife in this state. He’d already tried that on me at my Hooked on Fishing office, I reminded him, and I wasn’t any more convinced now than I had been then that he would be doing all of this on principle only.

He sat there in silence, a red tide of annoyance washing up past rings of loose neck skin.

“Come on, Mackey,” I said. “Do you really think if they started making money off lion hunters they’d channel one cent of
it to our old lab? You know how things work in the department. Lion money does not go to fish guys, fish money does not go to lion guys.”

“I know how things used to work in the department,” he said, suddenly looking smug as a fed toad.

“What, I work there thirty years and things move at a glacial clip, I’m gone two weeks and they suddenly change? What’s changed?”

He drove on, his lips clamped down on the secret that buzzed around inside.

“Anyway,” I said, “be sure you tell Elsie about Mrs. Be Nice.”

“That head-case back there? Why?”

“Her husband tells her there’s a lion in the bushes, she believes it. Does Elsie pay that much attention to what you say?”

“No,” he said, his shoulders jumping as his eyes clamped shut. “Not by a damn sight.” He laughed for two blocks.

That was the last laughter I heard out of him for as long as our string of dry runs continued. Not that I didn’t try. Like they do at some ballparks, I started to tally our strike-outs. I drew K’s on little squares of paper and taped them to the visor in a row. I told him to hell with the department, we’d have a second career as authors. Our first book: The Town That Cried Lion. The more dour he got, the more merry I became. He grumbled, he reddened, he puffed—and I told him to keep it up. Soon he’d convince me I was a truly happy guy.

His engines started to really sputter as we neared the end of our first week together. It was at Mrs. Frazier’s house that they cut out completely, sending him into a tailspin. Mrs. Frazier had to be pushing ninety. Her body was frail, but not her vocal cords. Her imagination was in great shape. But strongest of all was her hunger for company. Don and I spent most of one afternoon sipping weak coffee in her musty living room, leaning back against her sofa doilies and being regaled by colorful accounts of the mountain lion that had taken to stalking her house at night, looking for ways
to get in. She’d heard it walking about on her roof, checking the chimney. A couple of times she’d peered out the window and seen its horrid eyes glowing at her through the glass. The noises it made were appalling, the yowls and screeches and such. She was scared silly. Petrified.

No more petrified than her listeners, surely. I would probably still be sitting there if not for Don, who at some point deep in the third hour threw off the chains of his traditional upbringing and interrupted this venerable matron’s train of thought—stood up in the middle of one of her seven-page sentences and stopped her cold, saying we’d be glad to take a look around the house and tell her if we saw any cougar sign.

When we got outside I staggered around on the porch a minute, waiting for the feeling to return to my legs. Don headed straight for the truck.

“Where you going?” I said.

“You want to go through the motions, go ahead. If not, let’s take off. I’m ready.”

“Was it something she said?”

He didn’t even look up.

When my legs were game I took a solitary tour of the Frazier residence, including a visit to the roof. As far as I could tell, the main varmint operating at ground level was the gopher who had made a putting green of the back lawn. Up above, the chimney hole seemed secure. The lion would have a tough time getting past the sparrows who’d built their nest in it.

I went back to the front door, made some assurances that fell on deaf ears, and disentangled myself as gently as I could when Mrs. Frazier started trying to line Don and me up for dinner. I told him about the invitation as I climbed into the truck. He was too steamed to even thank me.

He drove away in silence while I whistled a frisky tune, taping another K in place. I stopped whistling and counted the K’s out-loud. “We ought to check the books,” I said. “We might be closing in on some kind of record.”
His eyes stayed on the road. “Sayers, what’s wrong with you?”
“If I knew that, you think I’d be here right now?”
“You really are having a good time, aren’t you?”
“Are you kidding? I feel lucky.”
“Why’s that?”
“I keep thinking where I’d be if I wasn’t on this wild goose chase with you.”
“Yeah, where?”
“At some home improvement place picking out stain for the gazebo I don’t want to build, probably. Or home drinking lemonade and eating soy bean tacos and brainstorming with Kyle. Think about that, and tell me this isn’t fun.”

It was fun that first fantastical week. And then I got a taste of the real thing.