Hear Him Roar

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My first stop on the road to recovery couldn’t be beat for aptness. Sadie invited me to convalesce in one of the two upstairs bedrooms in the house on the hill. My granddaughter Ruth may sleep in that room now, she may have filled it with her stuffed animals, her figurines and posters of shapely horses, but I doubt I’ll ever stop thinking of the room as Edward’s, since he slept there almost every night of his life.

I was grateful for the invitation. It bought me the time I needed to get clear of the pain drugs and ponder my next move. Also it gave Sadie and me a chance to talk. Initially we talked about mountain lions, a subject that interested her more than I knew. She had a curious take on these creatures. As far as I could tell the whole thing interested her mainly as it related to me. Ghost cat is certainly the best term to describe what mountain lions are to her. Ever since I’d found Verity in the den that day several weeks before, she’d been convinced that the mountain lion is a kind of totem animal to me. She believes firmly and literally in reincarnation and she saw that cat as our Edward in another form. All mountain lions were related to me in what she called the “spirit sense,” which explained why I got caught up in the whole controversy in the first place.

In spite of all I’ve been through, this way of thinking remains pretty much alien to me. Her beliefs do have a kind of logic to them, I can see it, but I still can’t buy into it as willingly as she does. I can’t believe. Yet I think that in the past I was so quick and so content to disbelieve that I ended up cheating myself of something valuable. Brook pointed out to me that the mountain lion lives in our North American minds as both villain and victim.
I thought about that while I lay mending, about Edward’s death and what it did to me after, the way it burned me with the villain’s brand. Also I thought of the remoter past, the farm memories that visited me while I was bedded down in Brook’s barn, the old fear of my murderous daddy that after all those festering decades had finally come to light. Was I a victim too? If so, didn’t that mean Sadie had a point? My kinship with the cougar was strong.

We chatted about this and other matters when she came up in the mornings with my breakfast and the paper. On the second or third morning the paper was already open to an article she wanted me to see. I hadn’t made it more than a few lines down before she’d started to summarize the thing for me, explaining how they found the boy who had disappeared by the river. Turns out it was a family drama. His mother had snatched him and hidden him away down around Fresno somewhere, striking back at the father and stepmom, who’d proved her unfit the year before in an ugly custody trial.

“Jesus,” I said. “What a species.”

Sadie wondered why I wasn’t more pleased by the news. The child was not dead after all. This cleared the mountain lions and put Cliff Carter on the hotseat, didn’t it?

I reminded her that Carter and Beech had already backed away from their original position. Carter knew better than to keep pushing when they didn’t have any evidence. A couple of days before, the two of us had marveled over his exchange with a reporter who tried to pin him down on the bogus lion video. He dodged the questions like a pro.

“He is something,” Sadie said, shaking her head.

“And he did get his lion.”

She took the paper from me and started flipping through the pages. “That reminds me. There’s a letter to the editor about that, saying they have no way of knowing if the lion they got was the one that killed those people’s goat. They trapped it twenty miles up the river, on the opposite bank. Guess who the author is,” she said, eyeing me.

I felt the blood coming into my face.

“Brook London,” she read from the paper, “Olives Zoo. She’s calling for a public necropsy.”
“Sounds like Brook.”
Sadie’s dark eyes settled on me. “Dad, did you have feelings for Brook? Do you, I mean.”
My face answered for me.
She smiled. “I don’t know why I didn’t realize. I mean, I must have known at some level. Otherwise I wouldn’t have been so mad at you.”
“Because of the age thing?”
“That, yeah. But also the speed of it.”
“I was looking for a lifeboat, I guess. It was like you said when you came to the zoo and chewed me out. I was hiding.”
“Listen,” she said, her brow curdling. “About that…”
“Don’t apologize.”
“But—”
“No. I’ll bet I know the first thing you thought after you found out I was in the hospital and heard how I got there. You thought it was your fault, didn’t you? I did a crazy thing because you were ticked off at me.”
She glanced at me, then away.
“That’s why I’m here, isn’t it?” I said. “You took me in because you felt bad?”
“You make it sound so cut-and-dry. That was probably part of it.”
“Just like you were part of what I did that night. A small part, really. A lot less than you think.”
I looked at her and she looked at her lap. “Anyway,” I said, “concerning Brook. You’ve got nothing to worry about. She’s hot for Kyle.”
Now Sadie looked up. “Jean’s really pleased. She met Brook at the hospital.”
“I didn’t know Jean was there.”
“She was keeping a low profile. Didn’t want to upset you.”
“That was considerate.”
And more than I deserved, I could hear us both thinking as she cleared the breakfast things away.