

California Dreaming

When we drove to Willows, California in February, I walked downtown to get a haircut. In the barbershop, a stuffed bobcat crouched on a shellacked limb over the fireplace. Stuffed fish hung on plaques on the wall; stuffed pheasants and quail stood several places in the room. Hunting, fishing, and gun magazines covered a low table.

I'd been in when we visited in September. The barber did a good job cutting my hair, and he was a pleasant-enough man.

I got into the chair, and he wrapped the cloth around me. He said, "I cut your hair before. Last winter, I think it was. You're from Oregon, and if I think a minute, I can say who you're visiting. I know it's your wife's mother, and I know the family, but I can't think of who she is. I will in a minute, though."

"Do you remember everyone who comes in that well?"

"No. It's your ears. I've been cutting hair for thirty years, and I've never seen ears grow more hair. A lot of men have hair growing at the edges, but you have hair growing from your ears everywhere except the backs. I remember that from last time you were here. I remember you didn't want me to trim the hair on your ears last time you were in. Do you want me to trim the hair on your ears this time?"

"Just the edge, so it isn't sticking out past the rest of my hair."

He started cutting my hair. "I remember where you're from. That's elk country up there. We talked about elk last time you were here. Did you get an elk this year?"

"No. We did talk about elk. We see a lot of elk where I live, but I don't hunt."

A young man came in and sat down to wait. He told the barber about a eucalyptus stump he'd dragged home behind his pickup so he could carve wildlife figures from the wood. "I think it's gonna make some really nice carvings. I cut into it after I got it home, and I really like all the curly grain down where the roots branch off, and the color. Be a while, but I'll bring a piece in and show you when I get the first one done."

A woman brought in some hair-care products, and she talked with the barber about prices and quantities. He told her what he wanted to buy from her, and she wrote what he wanted down on a form on her clipboard. The barber addressed the young man who sat in a leather-covered chair, waiting for his turn. "What do you think of the cougar hunt the Department of

Fish and Game is talking about?"

"I haven't heard anything about it."

"You'd better find out about it, cause they're having a meeting with the public next week, and then they're gonna decide what to do. The population of cougars has come way up in California. They put a lot of pressure on the deer herd. Cougars have been seen right at the edge of town, in school playgrounds."

The woman selling hair-care products, the young man who planned to carve a eucalyptus stump into wildlife figures, and the barber who cut my hair talked about cougars and the meeting at the Department of Fish and Game the next week and whether the cougars should be hunted or not. I joined in the conversation a little, but the barber ran clippers, vacuums, and other noisy machines here and there on and around my head, and I missed a lot of what was said, so I let them settle it however they'd settle it. I didn't live there, so whatever I might say would come from an outsider anyway.

The barber forgot I said just the edge of my ears and clipped most of the hair in my ears, and those little cut-off, short hairs felt strange for several weeks, more sensitive to touch, and they made a bristly noise when touched. Next time, I'll speak up even above three people talking loud and fast and an electric machine and say, "Just along the edges of my ears. Don't trim the hair in my ears."

The woman left. She doesn't want the cats hunted at all. The barber wants a limited hunt, "Just to trim the population a little. I'm not saying wipe them out or anywhere near it. Just trim them enough to take the pressure off the deer herd and get them away from the playgrounds."

I don't know what the younger man thinks. Maybe he wants to hunt them. I couldn't hear most of what he said. When I paid the barber, I saw figures carved from black walnut next to the cash register. Dall's sheep, an elk cow and calf, and a cougar, all of them eight to fourteen inches long and proportionate to each other. I thought they were really well made, by someone who had studied the animals and put them and part of himself into the wood.

I wanted to ask the young man if the animals in dark, polished walnut were his work, but the young man and the barber talked about hunts and meetings with Fish and Game, and I didn't want to interrupt, so I took my three dollars change and said thanks and walked out into the sunshine.

Sunshine. A warm day. I could take a long walk on a day like this, but it doesn't take many blocks of concrete and asphalt before my knees hurt, and I don't know of anyplace close that isn't concrete and asphalt, so I just walk back to my wife's

mother's house and sit in the back yard and read books.

Mountain lions on the edge of the city. I should have asked him, day or night? With people around or not? Who saw them? What schools? Where? But my polite habit stopped me from interrupting their conversation.

When we were here in September, my wife and our daughters and I drove up the canyon to see what used to be some of my wife's and my favorite places to swim, to walk, to be by ourselves together. Every place here in the northern Sacramento Valley has changed. I knew it would be like that. Twenty years. I've been warned. My sister said, "The canyon is wall-to-wall houses now."

Yes. It is. Every place I used to go when I needed to be away from people is filled with people now. Twenty years ago, I sat on that bluff and watched a coyote cross the small meadow below until it smelled me or heard me or saw me and hightailed for the brush. Now, three houses and their carefully-tended grounds occupy what was the meadow, and two houses have been built above the bluff.

I walked across their yards when there was nothing but wild, tall grass, and thistles to steer around and nettles along the stream, and I shucked my clothes on the bank, where the driveway is now, and the car is parked, and I jumped into the water and swam, and no one crowded me. Down there where the little garden-tool shed, made of sheet metal and shaped like a barn, sits now, was open space between brush and trees, with wild grasses and flowers.

A long time ago, before I even knew Laura, to whom I'm married now, Doug parked his station wagon early in March. My first marriage was breaking up, and I didn't know what to do about it. I didn't know if I could do anything at all about it. I was half-drunk and drinking another beer, and Doug figured I needed someone to talk to and volunteered, so we left the party, and I told him to drive out by the creek.

It was almost midnight. I said, "I've been swimming in that creek almost this early in the year." I looked at him, sitting behind the steering wheel in starlight and moonlight, and I realized I didn't want to talk. I emptied my pockets, got out of the car, took off my shirt and shoes, and started for the creek that was running high in its banks. Doug got out of the car and said, "Hey, don't be crazy."

I hit the water in a flat dive, so cold, I almost couldn't swim. I chopped the water in clumsy strokes, swept down the current, reached for the other side, swam hard, reached for the other side, climbed out and walked into the brush.

I got to Vallie Rae's house before daylight and woke her up. She said, "Your wife keeps telling me you're crazy. Now I

believe her. You are one completely crazy man.”

“Let me catch a few hour’s sleep here. I’m beat and cold to the bone.”

“Look at your feet. They’re all cut up. Come in here on the bed, but keep your feet off it. They’re all bloody and dirty.” She brought a pan of warm water and soap and a washcloth and towel and gently washed my feet. She went back for clean water twice. She patted my feet dry with the towel. I pulled covers over me, and I fell asleep and didn’t wake up until afternoon.

I haven’t seen Vallie Rae in twenty years. If I went over to Chico and wandered around long enough, I might see her. I don’t know that I’d even recognize her. For all I know, she’s thousands of miles from here. For all I know, she’s dead. Lots of people are dead now. It’s worth a moment’s thought that I’ve survived this long and my existence is fairly steady, now.

My daughters and my wife come back from the park and come out to see what I’m doing in the back yard. I tell them about the cougars in the playgrounds.

“In the daytime? When children are in the playgrounds?”

“I don’t know.”

“What schools?”

“I don’t know. I don’t even know if it’s the truth. It’s just what the barber said.”

As the focus of our visit this time, we drive up to see a place we might have, rent-free, for taking care of it. All the information we received is wrong. It sounded so good and looks so terrible. The trailer is tiny, rather than the forty foot long, ten wide Jackie said was there. The side of the hill is a fire trap. Dry, dense brush crowds in close to the trailer and the only road out winds through dense, highly-flammable brush.

My wife is upset. “How could the information all be so wrong? Did the people lie about it to Jackie? or did she hear it wrong? or remember wrong, or what happened?”

“I don’t know. It won’t work, and that pretty well eliminates moving to California. That’s all I know.”

We drove down the winding gravel road. Five wild turkeys crossed the road ahead of us. I stopped the car. The turkeys flew from the road to the top of the cutbank and ran out of sight into the brush above the road.

In all the wild country I’ve lived in, in all my life, I’ve never seen wild turkeys before. How could these iridescent, cunning birds, able to maintain their flock and their wildness in the midst of this over-developing country bear any relationship to the domestic birds that are so stupid even a careful husbandman is hard pressed to keep them alive until they’re marketable?

My daughters are excited by seeing these magnificent, wild

birds. So is my wife. So am I.

The wild turkeys fly from the road, land above the cutbank, and run into the dense ceonothus, manzanita, and whitethorn above the road, out of sight. We drive out of the canyon and back across the valley floor.

Late that afternoon, I'm nearly overwhelmed by the noise of the little city all around me. Cars hot-rod down main street two blocks away. Heavy traffic on the freeway rumbles the town. Cars pull in and out of the parking lot of the sheriff's office across the street; car doors slam. Some neighbor has turned the television too loud.

My mother-in-law's house is restlessly noisy. The refrigerator clicks on and rattles the kitchen with its freon-compressing noises. The bathtub faucet drips, and drops of water echo down the drain with hollow sounds. My wife's mother will turn on the television set soon. She acquired the television habit while living alone. Television is company, white noise that blanks out the cacophonous sounds of the city around her house. But, to me, television is just closer cacophony.

I put my sleeping bag and a ground-cloth and me into the pickup and drive away, east across the valley. I don't know where I'm going, but somewhere past the edge of all this industrious noise, a quiet place will give me refuge for a night.

Cougars. Mountain lions. American panthers. Pumas. Catamounts. North America's only great cats. They stalk through my mind.

Thirty years ago, Jim and I hunted deer up on Carpenter's ridge, from the rock pile all the way to the top. We ate lunch and sat at the top of the ridge through the middle of the day, watching a long slope below us, but all we saw was other hunters. Late afternoon, Jim said, "If we took a slow walk down both sides of the ridge, we'd get back to the car about dark."

"I'd like to get delayed by having to dress out and pack a good buck."

We split up and walked, one on each side of the ridge. Below the ridge, I sat by the trail and waited for Jim. The sun set. Jim walked out of the dense forest and joined me on the trail, and we walked down toward the car. I kept thinking I heard something behind and beside us, off in the brush. Three-fourths of the way down the trail, Jim said, "Are my ears playing funny tricks on me?"

"Are they? Mine are too."

"Where do you hear it?"

"Behind and to the right."

"Definitely not a human being. Nobody could navigate that brush this fast, with no more noise than that."

At the foot of the ridge, we walked from the trail onto the dirt road and down the road. We stopped and looked back. The day's light had almost gone. In the darkly-shadowed road, a cougar stood and watched us. Jim brought his rifle up. I reached out and jarred his shoulder. "Don't shoot."

"Why the hell not? What's the matter with you?"

The cougar, a shadowed, smoothly-moving wild animal, disappeared into the brush. We walked down the road to Jim's car. We unloaded our rifles, put them in the back seat, and got into the car. Down there on the ground, with forest all around us, it was really dark by then, with bright stars above us.

Jim started the car and turned the headlights on and illuminated the cougar. It stood in the middle of the road, not more than a hundred feet from us, looking toward us. The cougar turned and walked into the forest, out of sight.

We drove from that dusty road up onto the paved highway. Jim said, "You're an idiot." He stepped down on the accelerator, and that hopped-up Oldsmobile rocketed us back toward civilization. Then Jim said, "But I'm glad I didn't shoot it."

That was a long time ago.

I drive through Chico, a busy town, even at night. I wonder, what playgrounds? Who saw cougars? East of town, up in the foothills of the Sierras, I find a dirt road that doesn't go anywhere in particular, and I drive down it. I shut off the engine and get out and stand there. Forest of pine trees and fir trees stands quietly around me.

I still hear traffic on the freeway, down in the valley, but it's a long way, and it isn't too bad. I spread my ground-cloth on the dirt and unroll my sleeping bag on the ground-cloth. I see motion in the edge of my vision. I turn and watch a large owl fly above me, a dark shadow against the starlit sky.

I get into my sleeping bag. Two or three days to finish everything here, and we'll head north again. I'll be glad to leave California behind. My wife and daughters haven't been that enthusiastic about moving to California either, once we got here and looked it over. We will return to the quiet valley in the Blue Mountains of northeastern Oregon with new appreciation for everything there.

I have trouble getting comfortable. The sleeping bag rubs those cut-off stubs of hairs on my ears. I don't like the way it feels or the short, bristly sounds it makes. I fall asleep thinking my hair will grow rapidly, until it bends quietly aside again when touched.