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Black Cloud

He's out early. On foot. Crossing the pasture behind the half-divided farmhouse built before he was born. Sixty-two now, and at that age when he has given up the day-to-day of putting food on the table for his four children--grown now and on their own--and feed in the troughs for two-hundred head of cattle, like children in their own way, and the thrill of loving women after dark. Free now to fight for principles born from print. Though that's not quite right either; he's still strong, though lean, tough and temperamental, still physical in the old way. Not thinking in terms of what's political so much as practical. Except for last summer when he had problems with the IRS. He'd like to put a face to that name, Mr. IRS, and just once, he'd like to best the government.

He shifts the barrel of his rifle from left to right shoulder, gazing up with electric green eyes at the bluing sky. A plastic gallon jug swings from a length of cord tied to one belt loop and flops against his right leg. Long strides in calf-high, lace-up boots, khaki pants and a worn green shirt with sleeves rolled on muscular tanned arms. He used to be six-foot-four, he used to have full sandy hair; now he is six-foot-two and his hair is thinning like winter grass. Still, he is handsome and proud, a ladies' man who has loved only one lady. In a minute he will look down, after he passes

from the open field of split-tipped smut grass, to the soft gray dirt of the branch banks. Checking for tracks of a Texas cougar in Southeast Georgia. Three calves lost already. He looks up, he listens. No sound, save for the locusts in the scrub oaks and black gums along the branch. No helicopters (Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission) whipping the warm air. All week, black helicopters have been scouting his land, sweeping west from Highway 129 to the Alapaha River, 800 acres of timberland, pasture, and swamp, in search of one of the cougars tagged and released in North Florida.

The purpose of the experiment is to test the suitability of the site to support a population of panthers in the future, and to develop technology and techniques to establish a population... The experiment uses the Texas Cougar because we just don't have enough Florida panthers to experiment with. We used different ages and sexes and some translocated animals, some caught in the wild in Texas, and others born in captivity.

It reads good, it sounds good, humane and helpful. So does Welfare. So does the IRS.

A rooty smell along the run of the branch and what Wilton imagines is cat. Old tracks, no dirt clinging to dewy blades of bull grass. He follows the wallowing brown water west through the valley of trees where on his left the fenced-in pasture is yellowing in the rising sun; and beyond, on the hill, the family cemetery with its bleached headstones designating the graves of his wife, his mama and daddy, and two generations of grandparents and kin: the Nortons. When he spots the cougar this time, he will shoot; no holding back because he's read in the Valdosta Herald that killing or maiming one of the

tagged cats is a crime. He cannot recall exactly what the fine cited by the newspaper amounted to, but it seems inconsequential. He is going to shoot the cougar anyway, first chance he gets. He has made up his mind. No more calling the Commission to report the cat, no more trying to persuade the voice on the phone that the tracks he has seen aren't dog tracks. An insult. He has lived in these woods-- Georgia--side of the Georgia/Florida line--all his life. He knows a dog from a cat.

Fresh tracks now, the daisy-wheel tracks of the cat. Big as a boy's hand. Eyeing the hickories and liveoaks along the west ridge of pasture, he keeps walking, walking over the paw prints of the cat. Power in that. This is his land, land passed down by his daddy, land passed down to his daddy's daddy, from Old Samuel back there in the cemetery. Not that Wilton is sentimental--he doesn't think that way-- but there is a feeling of duty and belonging in owning, in knowing that as fact. He follows the tracks toward the river, where his dwindling herd of cattle is grazing the fenced block of pasture east of the riverswamp. He's already sold off half his herd to pay the IRS for back taxes he didn't owe; another third sold to pay a lawyer who tried, but failed, to prove Wilton didn't owe what he didn't owe, which circled round to him owing--with interest and penalties--nearly twice as much as they said he owed in the first place.

What was strange, what Wilton couldn't get out of his head, was the IRS agent, a stocky, steel-eyed junior, sent to his house last summer to assess Wilton's "holdings." That the agent actually came was not half so strange as his coming early in the morning, drinking Wilton's strong hot coffee in the high-ceilinged kitchen while hedging about how he'd like to help, but facts are facts, computers

don't lie, IRS is IRS, and he was just an agent doing his job like anybody else--that kind of shit. He would do what he could, he said, to check it out. The People have their rights. Atlanta, call Atlanta. But when Wilton did call he was put on hold for thirty minutes, then connected with another robotic agent who spouted the same figures from the same computer file. Wilton had asked for the top man and, after another thirty minutes, was patched through to a woman who read off the same computerized figures. Computers don't lie. IRS is IRS, the unseen God.

Would be something, Wilton thinks, if that old cougar just happened to be stalking the river bank. Would be something if Wilton could shoot it and roll it into the river, not have to run back home for his pickup to load it up and bury it on the other side of the Florida line. He doesn't expect that. What he expects he'll have to do is shoot the cat and strip its collar and tie it to the milk jug and toss it in the river. Let the black helicopters track the tattle-tale tag down the Alapaha, to the Suwannee, to the sea.

Out-smart them, get them off his back. But lately Wilton is finding he needs some cause, something to keep him getting up in the morning, something mental as well as physical to keep from bogging down in boredom. He is busy enough, most of the time, true, but often he catches himself considering his ritual of checking fence lines and haying cattle and bargaining with pulpwooders and loggers: Is he only putting down tracks on the old homeplace till he gets to the point where he'll be bodily moved from the house to the graveyard?

It is end of summer now and he tries to titillate himself with thoughts of fall, deer hunting and duck hunting, Thanksgiving and Christmas--holidays have always been his wife Ann's department. Not a fusser, Ann, but in her serene way secretly excited about the children and grandchildren coming home for a couple of days. Wilton secretly excited too, though he never showed it. She knew. She kept him going that way: accepting that he both loved and liked both her and the children without him having to say so. He'd never thought about it till after she died. And though he misses her ritual ordering of the house--centering the tufted flower motif on the white chenille bedspread, frying catfish and squirrels, raking scraps from her plate for the mice-catcher cats--what he misses most is her long-limbed healthy body (harboring cancer as secret as her excitement), her singy voice, her commanding without commanding. Truth is, if Ann had been alive, Wilton probably wouldn't have had that trouble with the IRS (Ann made out the checks, Ann wrote the letters, Ann handled the business calls). He feels timid thinking about the IRS. Truth is, he will die if he doesn't feel tough again. Tough by himself. Tough inside the house belonging to Ann, as well as outside in the fields and woods belonging to him. No more leaning on pampered women--though at times his body does crave another body--who likewise will pamper him.

Passing into the damp shade of the swamp, he listens, walking easy, but hears only squirrels scamping up the pines and oaks. Sucking air through their teeth. A crow caws and another, a warning to either Wilton or the cat. So far, he hasn't laid eyes on the cat; so far, he has seen only signs of the cat. What if it is nothing but a bob cat as one of the agents has claimed? But Wilton knows better;

he's just testing himself. Something he never used to do, but now does often. What really ticks him off is some of his neighbors--mostly farmers--are more afraid of the Commission than the cat. They're mad as hell about the cougar project; they rattle on to each other about what's not fair, gathered around the tailgates of their pickups, then go home and plop in their recliners to watch for news of the project on TV. Wilton has tried to convince them that the cat is fact, that the "Cougar Project" is theory. This is war.

With the birds singing in the mossy oaks, it is hard for Wilton to imagine a cougar close by. But he knows better. Though the tracks have now angled off the two-path road to the river, into the level stand of head-high reeds, he knows the cougar is out there. He hopes so. He steadies the rifle barrel on his right shoulder, creeping on toward the river where the mussel scent of willow rides the east-bound breeze. He watches for the reeds to part, for the cream fur of the cat to show--the pussy-cat picture in the newspaper--but only the breeze moves among the reeds. When he looks down again, he is startled to see that the tracks have picked up on the road again, irritated that he hasn't been watching for them and found their starting point. Up ahead, where the road curves, the tracks curve. He stops, listening, hearing the purling of the river beyond the treeline. Twigs snapping from what could be a deer, or a stray yearling, or a cougar. Again, Wilton believes he smells the cat, warm-ripe and sour. The kind of smell that evokes a cream color.

Texas cougars have seldom been known to attack man. Only two deaths from cougar attacks in the last 90 to 100 years. The chances of being struck by lightening are a whole lot better.

Still, Wilton can't help gazing behind and aside for the cat he figures will attack a human if it will attack a cow. He has never thought about that before, wishes he hadn't thought about it now. Is glad nobody is around to see him peering wide-eyed through the myrtles and palmettoes nestling pines.

Just as he's getting a firmer grip on the rifle stock, he hears the unmistakable beating of helicopter rudders upriver. Then their mosquito-hawk shadows floating over the grassy floodplain between the river bank and the swamp. A black cloud. Three copters. Almost over him. He ducks under cover of a wind-wrung hickory and waits for them to pass. They know the cougar is around, otherwise why would they be flying over his land? And like something happening that can't happen because you've just thought it, Wilton spies the cougar on the river bank, more yellow than cream, slinking north with a spotted fawn in its mouth. The helicopters are fading in the south, but Wilton decides to wait, not shoot yet, and watch the cougar, which as far as he can tell hasn't spotted him. Probably the deer scent and racket of the helicopters have addled his senses. A few yards north, still on the river bank, the cougar sprawls and tears at the spotted hide of the fawn with its teeth, holding it human-like between its great paws. Not fifty yards from Wilton, who can picture a blood spout springing between the lit gold eyes of the cat from the thirty-ought shot of his rifle.

When the sounds of the locusts claim the hard hum of the helicopters, he raises the rifle and aims at the cat's heart face, but just as he is about to shoot, he hears the thunder of the copters circling back.

He raises the barrel of the rifle to the sky and sites the black underbelly of the first copter, conjuring a Swastika of blood, then the second and the third, still aiming at the blown-glass sky of September after the copters have juddered upriver again. When he looks back at the bank for the cat, he sees only the pressed patch of green grass where it had sprawled. The shook branches of the trees along the river bank are settling like sand in water. Locusts hum. A dove coos.

He steps out from the flocked shade of the hickory and creeps toward the river bank where the cougar has probably skulked low with the fawn. Looking down at the inky flowing water, he sees only cregs and lacy white sandstone and inward-leaning tupeloes, willows and birches. No cougar, which makes him turn quick to check at his back. That he doesn't spot the cougar behind is more alarming than if it had been poised to pounce.

Striding north along the bank where the cattle have nibbled the sage and huckleberry bushes to stubble, he picks up a trail of blood from the mangled fawn. Blood droplets like end-of-the-world rain. Cat tracks at the base of bushes and briars, leaves flagged with blood. He tunes his ears for the risping of the cat in the oaks where Jim Creek dumps into the river, and is shocked by the sudden stretched body of the cat slinking across the northeast corner of the field. Wilton tips behind him with his eyes fixed on the cream hide, rifle barrel raised and aimed at its heart. So close he can see the collar with its metal tag dangling like a woman's locket.

The cougar stops in the fence jamb, pivots its head to look behind, its snake eyes merely curious, cautious--cats raised in captivity aren't fearful of people--though Wilton figures the cat has to be as scared as he is. He stops, finger on the trigger and squeezing. The shot rings out and the cougar leaps into the air, staggers forward and drops broadside on the grass. Legs scissoring, stiffening. Wilton waits till the soft cream belly of the cat quits pulsing, then hears the copters beating back downriver. He drops his rifle and runs to the river bank and begins breaking branches from a tupelo, carrying them to the still body of the cat where iridescent-winged blow flies are already buzzing. Kitten-pink mouth parted with blond whiskers blowing in the breeze. He kneels down and unbuckles the collar, has to yank hard to free it from the limp weight of the thick neck, covers the body with branches and straps the collar through the handle of the plastic jug, goes back to the river and starts to toss it in. He waits, watching above the current the first copter swooping low, fanning branches like a mighty storm above the wrinkled water, and then the second. He irons himself to the trunk of a tree. After the third copter has passed, he follows the bank south and across the fenced-off pastures, toward the house, staying under shelter of trees along the branch, listening for the copters.

When he can no longer hear them, when the sky is clear except for buzzards lassoing the warm air overhead, he starts across the pasture near the cemetery where the small herd of red cattle are now grazing. Red Pole cattle that his Daddy and uncles had brought by train to these parts in the forties when he was a boy.

"Hoo now!" Wilton says low, inching close to a hippy brood cow with her calf. The calf and cow gaze at him with glassy dome eyes that look filled with the tannic water flowing from the branches to the Alapaha. As if their blood has taken on the color of the water, bloodstream of his homeplace, like the branchwater-tinted scales of the fish he catches and sometimes leaves overnight rather than clean and cook and eat by himself. Hand on the broad whorled brow of the calf, Wilton straps the collar around its soft red neck. Then he heads for home to get his pickup to go back and bury the cat.

He has outwitted somebody. He wishes he could name who.

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Off and on, for the next two days, the black helicopters continue sweeping the woods and pastures, and Wilton waits, gravitating from kitchen window to the back porch to watch them swoop low over the scattering cattle near the cemetery. Then on Thursday, foamy gray clouds seem to cover and muffle the tat-tat-tat of the copters. Friday morning, while it rains, they circle over one spot on the river, the place where Wilton has shot the cat. All morning, he waits and wonders, then after dinner, he sets out walking toward the swamp, keeping close to the trees with rain ticking through the leaves. Nearing the swamp, he hears the copters lift and maneuver north, but keeps going. Surely, they have spotted some sign of the cougar kill. Maybe Wilton can expect a visit from one of the Commission agents. He should have tossed the jug in the river with the tag strapped to it. He shouldn't have tried to be smart and collared the calf to keep them guessing. But what is done is done, and he is part-glad, part-sad. He turns around and starts for home

when he realizes that he is only walking to be walking, to keep from standing still.

That evening he sits on the front porch and waits, reared in one of the highback rockers with his boots crossed on one of the hand-aded porch post. Frogs blat and cheep and water drips from the liveoaks and the tin eaves of the house.

He doesn't know that he will sleep on the porch, until he feels his eyelids weigh heavy and his boot soles begin to slide down the post. Till that blood-warm feeling of peace begins to slip over him like a blanket on a cool night--frogs blating and cheeping and water dripping from the liveoaks and the tin eaves of the house. Dreaming and knowing he is dreaming--just a moving picture on the backsides of his eyelids. Maybe he is not dreaming; maybe he should wake up before what he senses coming up robs him of his only peace since Ann Died.

No, he is not scared, even with the death-like numbness of his feet now stepping off the familiar ground of the pasture between the house and the cemetery, though the bright sun behind him is so stark that the white headstones blind him. Not even when the soft cat shape, sun-colored, edges along the south side of the chain-link cemetery fence, around the corner to the west side; and in the foreground, near the cemetery gate, appears what looks like a red blanket, the same blanket covering Wilton on this cool night, but which he knows is the red calf with the cougar's collar around its neck. Again the yellow cat steps into the corner of his eye, crouching low and close around the northwest corner of the fence, and Wilton lifts the foam-light rifle to his right shoulder, squints his left eye shut and peers through the scope with his right for a wide-

awake view of the cat streaking slow-motion toward the trees along the branch.

The shot rings out and the cougar leaps into the air, staggers forward and drops broadside on the grass. Legs scissoring, stiffening. Wilton waits till the soft cream belly of the cat quits pusling, then he walks on toward the cemetery, steps around the heaped red blanket like puddled blood and through the cemetery gate that usually creaks but doesn't this time, walks past the rows of glittering headstones of his dead kin--all facing the rising sun--and on toward Ann's new granite headstone and the body-shaped mound of raw Norton earth and sits on her headstone waiting with his face to the setting sun.