



Colin Browne / THE COUGAR

*What humour is it makes him flail
His tawny quarters with that tail?*

Pratt's BOTTOM

I promised I would tell a story about Lucy Wellburn and the cougar. Rather, she has asked me to tell you a story about herself and a cougar. So it is not all her story, which means that parts are from other parts and parts are dreamed up.

Lucy is at fault herself, for only part of her never married and became an eccentric maiden aunt on Saturna Island, while another waited years before setting out in search of injustices to right. A large part of her can loll for hours at the piano improvising cougar music. Which, unhappily, rarely occurs, for she's usually too busy running back and forth between the other parts trying to decide which is less like her.

A story then is like a puzzle in which you have to figure out which parts are made up and which are not. What about that clean nurse and the brain surgeon suffering a crisis of confidence? You can do it, you can do it. What about that spoiled daughter (who deserved it) and her self-destructive artist? What about that puppy and its whip-crazy owner? What about that drunken novelist and his photoplay wife? Why not begin here?

A logger had once told me that if you set fire to your mittens and throw them at a mountain lion that would take effect, and I know that bears are often very susceptible to human laughter. I should add of course that cougars are not properly mountain lions (the latter being sub-species *missoulensis*, native to the Rockies and Selkirks), although generically both are *felices concolor*, more recently referred to as *puma concolor* in order to distinguish them from African cats which they only carelessly resemble. This is the fiery red tiger seen prowling the beaches by Vespucci and Columbus, designated *cougar* by the fastidious Georges Louis Leclerc de Buffon (*Histoire naturelle*. Paris, 1761 & 1776). de Buffon's interest, apart from unknottng the unaccustomed tongue, was in securing for the French people (this only scant years before they took action to secure it for themselves) a name of their own.

Buffon's synthesis was via Ray (*Synopsis methodica animalium quadrupedum et serpentini generis*. London, 1693) via Pison's adaptation of Marcgraf (*Historiae rerum naturalium Brasiliae*. Paris. 1648), the same Marcgraf, or Marcgrave, who led the ill-fated and hideous expedition of dwarfs into the Matto Grosso. Fearing that a posse might frighten away the game he had come to collect for specimens, he feathered specially chosen dwarf carriers as bright tropical birds, only to stand helplessly by while they were brutally savaged and eaten one after the other by demented yaguarundis shrilly drunk on the mouldy fruit of some locally fermenting berry. Marcgraf was fortunate to escape with his life. He lost an eye and his left arm never fully recovered its mobility after being crushed by a sleeping anaconda. According to his account, the serpent crept into his tent while he was sleeping one night and began crushing his arm while dreaming, for which reason he bore it no malice the remainder of his days.

Marcgraf did return however with our word cougar's root, kissed from the lips of the poetic Tupis deep in the Amazon basin. This word, *sussuarana*, he tempered, for unknown reasons, into *cuguacuara*, perhaps to strike a linguistic bargain between the Tupi and the Guarani. The transformation thus accomplished from fricative to stop, Buffon's sensible reduction of the Indian word into the European syllables *cougar* seems almost inevitable. In this way the wilderness was conquered. By 1865 no less an authority than Francis Parkman had blessed the name (in which book? The date should be a clue. Answer at end of story.), and those who travail in the woods and dwell on the scraped edges of our cities have been so successfully converted that red tiger, even though it proved a more vivid description, has gone the way of gee whiz.

In these parts the Indians often dried cougar paws and used them to drive away illness. The paws were hung over the patient's head while a shaman intoned words and names privy to himself and lost to us today. As usual, no evidence of their efficacy remains. Nor have any labcoats tested the ability of cougar gall to provoke resistance to continuing disease. Both prescriptions no doubt called upon the very real power of sympathetic magic and both, lest we take them lightly and forget, required a cougar. A perilous hunt demands faith.

To write, then, that Lucy Wellburn's great aunt Lucy Wellburn was a demented old woman can only be misleading. And wrong. One must be very careful what one selects to write about the departed, for almost anything looks true in paragraphs, particularly when the subject's sailed over the bar, as great aunt Lucy might herself have put it. I don't know of course if she read Lord Tennyson, but I can't imagine her not portaging a small book of something along the scaley beaches on her way to render a favourite arbutus. I would hazard a guess at Dante Rosetti:

*But just when at that swallow's soar
Your neck turned so,
Some veil did fall . . .*

and, perhaps later, when she no longer stayed out all night save that once and he was still a novelty, Hopkins:

*And I have asked to be
Where no storms come . . .
And out of the swing of the sea.*

Who knows, even Henley, the much maligned inspiration for two of the greatest inventions of his and our age? (Another quiz: who? Rnsr at end, please.) Underestimate not the limpid democracy of the pocket edition! Uplifting sentiment the birthright of all! And that fertile, resonant note, the "West".

*Let me be gathered to the quiet west,
The sundown splendid and serene,
Death.*

So she was on the right part of the planet for growing old and weird. And as she did she began to drop little parts of what came before into the hands and imaginations of those who loved her, which were those who were not afraid of her, which were not many. One was Lucy herself, who was crazy about the old woman. When she was little, Lucy would fold up beside the bony old great aunt and make her tell her about the time the cougar, you know auntie? Now that Lucy has grown up herself and great aunt Lucy is gone, she has to tell the story to me, to prove that it really happened. Which is the main reason for this story.

This old aunt, the story goes then, was a water colour enthusiast, and often set off across the island at dawn without waking anyone, returning so late that everyone was asleep again. It's all written in a magazine somewhere, at least this part is, but I can't find it. All they say is that she was ahead of her time because she went out alone and came back alone. You wonder if she came back with sperm drooling down her leg. You wonder what she did out there.

Sleep, probably. Recover from the previous day's lack of sleep. And I have seen most of her paintings. They used to sell them at the church whenever there was a rummage sale, but Lucy made them stop. She finally had to tell them the paintings would be worth a fortune one day. So now we have them hanging around our house, and I like them. Lucy switches them endlessly and it's almost as if each painting in a year passes through daylight's cycle. Sunrise for two months, bright morning, then noon, golden afternoon, dusk, and late night moon. I wish I'd met old Lucy for this would be easier. I'm omitting a great deal of information which, though interesting, might be spurious. Which is not the point of a story.

The incident at hand relates the time great aunt Lucy strode up the bluff on a bright January morning after a heavy snowfall (the big one — do you remember the year?) and returned the next day with a cougar's two ears in her bag. Stayed out overnight in freezing weather. And when she came in just moved idly toward the fire and warmed her ten slim fingers before it, sans mot. William, her brother, just watched her, and his wife Kathleen almost exploded she was so frantic with questions. All this before they knew about the two ears. Which no one knew about until they began to smell.

So it finally came out. Uncle Bill brought the evidence to her in the kitchen one morning when they were all sitting around watching. As usual he'd been up first (I did meet him before he died, and he truly did rise first. In his later days the only function this seemed to serve was to wake everyone else in the house with furious clattering and banging in the sink and in the cupboards below it, none of which ever seemed to result in any food preparation.), and smelling something fishy as he called it several times, began to bang around in aunt Lucy's paintboxes and satchels. Which is how he came to present the two appendages that morning at breakfast. Lucy was livid. The strip ripped off sweet uncle Bill would have made a good bacon sandwich, aunt Kathleen later explained to me. Lucy's rage betrayed that she'd been found out, that she would now have to confess to her accusers her common but mysterious disappearances on the cliffs.

Aunt Kathleen poured everyone a fresh cup of coffee, turned off the Hitler news on the radio, and curled up on the window seat under the steamed-up panes of glass a thousand eyes had scratched. Uncle Bill pretended to be scouring milk pails that rattled like chains. Others were there. I can't remember all of them, but I know Grace was, and Willie. Lucy pretended she didn't want any coffee and aunt Kathleen had to get up again and pour it back into the pot. Between them, the two seemed to enjoy an agreement about personal real estate: Kathleen managed the kitchen & bathrooms, while Lucy stayed out of her way. I think this is how it formally worked. My Lucy has just told me that in fact great aunt Lucy often swept the upstairs bedrooms and took care of the garden. Or the roses anyway, for I know that Kathleen never let anyone touch her fuschias. Or mums.

The snow was thick and sweet. All about her on the road up into the far fields Lucy heard the heavy, magical whump as caps of snow slid melting off fir and cedar limbs. When she told this story to Lucy before she died, the great aunt paused, and recalled for the first time since that the Salish Indians used to bounce prayers up to heaven on the springy branches of cedar and fir. So it seemed to her that the forest was filled with praise that morning as she stepped up the hill. Such silence. The sea, far below like wrinkled slate, was noiseless, with not a slurp or bubble as it licked the dripping rinds of snow off beach rocks. Whump. Whump!

Whump. Manoeuvring the sunken tracks, she spied tiny hops of juncoes pressed into the snow, followed them criss-crossing her path, starred at junctions by the spit of chewn cones. The day warmed, and against the grey sky earth became luminous with snow. Snow began to melt from the nipples of every tree, and the forest became the noisiest water storm on earth, millions of thundering drips plunging into one hole each beneath a branch. Still she went on until she came to the farthest field. Whump!

Too dry to be useful, the field was hidden behind a long, tall brake of firs, and on the edge of it aunt Lucy had constructed a secret lean-to of cedar rails and boughs. In a minute she could be on the cliff's edge, summoned by the clatter of a great goat herd fussing along thin ledges below. Other times it would be a high V of geese or the munching and gulping of a tiny fawn nibbling leaves in the alders. I understand that while she was painting, if she liked what she was doing, she would loosen her wonderful hair and it would fall down her breast and catch sunlight in a rich and complex tangle. So her days passed, sublimely, napping, sipping clear water from leaves and from the noisy little rill at the far end of the point. Painting, painting.

What she thought of we can only guess. Reds, vermilions, blues, a suitable wash for the distant jut of Maxwell at eve. Perhaps she read poems. Maybe she hated poems. Maybe she wrote them. None remain if she did. Or none that we know of. She's the type to burn such things.

Hopkins wrote little of snow. Only in *Deutschland*, where it just happens to occur. None of those poets or painters wrote or painted snow. Snow is different here anyway, unlike any other snow I've known. Snow here is thick and wet and sexual. Snow here is a universe of falling and dripping and transformation. Snow here never stays the same for a minute. It enters rarely, falls all at once into the dark, swelling coniferous sea, and dares you to embrace it, only to flee. Whump. Whump!

Did she fall in love with snow? Is there not a term for this. It's the deep, holy silence. The billion drips dancing on command.

Drip. Drip. Imagine her dreaming under a winter moon in her tiny pine lean-to in the west. In a tree a big owl. And the stars!

Whump!

Eeeee! Eeeeeiiiiiee! Eeeeeeeeeeeeeee! Flap flap flap, flap flap.

Waking suddenly, and the twig snapping on the other side of the blankets. Straw. Lying very still makes it crackle.

It crackled. Whump!

According to Lucy aunt Lucy remained rigid for some time. She heard the animal passing by her wet boughs. Stars turned into drips and she heard a million pit-pat pits aiming chaotically at the snow. Three-inch paws began to rip the bark from her chopping stump, she heard tearing fibres and the catch of claws hooked in wood. Aunt Lucy was not afraid.

Or so she recalled. Lucy recalls. Which is the point that Lucy loved, for she fears cougars more than anyone alive. Not that she has ever seen one, or that she will, for as she was growing up the animals were being shot and trapped and pushed further and further into the hills behind the thin trailer towns fringing the highway. Her father's job was making cougar-proof buildings. In her father's arms or in his buildings she was safe. Nothing could enter. In the forest, however, nothing had to enter. It was already there. It was the people who entered.

In the woods people are guests. Lucy never feels quite welcome. Which is why she loved her great aunt Lucy so much. Which is why whenever she sleeps in a little orange tent on the edge of the forest she never does. Lying awake all night waiting to be eaten. Cougars manage to put away about 80 pounds of meat per meal. Lucy knows that no matter which eighty pounds of her are munched away she will be a goner. For fats it might be different, but Lucy is the type people think of as a bird.

At this point in the narrative uncle William piped up, dropping a bucket in the sink to punctuate. When Dad come out the woods was alive with the buggers, he said. He himself had once as a boy hunted cougars for the bounty, at that time \$35 (it has gone as high as \$50), in order to buy a camera. Dad had told him of a father and four sons only fourteen miles from Victoria in the early 80s who, in defence of their sheep, had killed over 300 cougars within a few years of arriving. The sheep actually belonged to the Puget Sound Agriculture Company, a scion of the Hudson's Bay Co., which at that time owned Vancouver's Island.

Before long the crackling began to sound like fire. Perhaps aunt Lucy really thought it was a fire. Tradition, hers, has it that she instantly thought of her shotgun. No one knew she had a shotgun. No one even knew she slept exiled in a little lean-to, so it should come as no surprise to discover that she kept other secrets. One of which is what she thought as she raised her shotgun from its manger. She says that she was afraid that the fire might cause it to explode. As she picked it up the flap of the lean-to, her cape, was drawn aside, gently, she reported, and the cougar's great rufous face appeared.

Now the *puma concolor vancouverensis* is darker than its colleagues, perhaps from living in the somber rainforest, and for some reason it has developed a steeply arched frontal profile, the result of which is that the animal's face appears more human than that of its mainland cousins. Expression seeks sympathy, which is what great aunt Lucy experienced. She fell in love.

His back was a cinnamon-rufous colour, and his throat and chin were a delicious creamy white. The front of his upper lip was white also, with black patches between lips & cheeks. His long whiskers were white, and the inside of his round, sweet ears. The ears did not pivot on a spikey tuft of hair as those of tabby cats like Miss Nancy lying here in the sun on the window seat. The outer edges of his ears were black, his nose was pink, she said, and unblinking yellow-green eyes "just looked at me, as if he understood everything!" The tip of his tail, very furry and heavy (for it was winter) was dark sienna. So he just gazed into her own green eyes. His feet were pinkish-buff.

Snow's attrition had driven him to the island, which he had hoped would be cluttered with stuck deer and, according to aunt Lucy, he had been disappointed. The year had not been kind to wild beasts, and very few of the little coastal deer were in evidence. Uncle William, always meticulous about his hunting, had been condemned to potting off a goat for Thanksgiving when the relatives came up from Seattle. On his wife's side. A photograph taken that year shows them at the table. Or the shapes of darkness indicating heads ranged in orbit about two tall leaking candles, the magnificent Georgian gravy boat a knobbly moon front & center on the very chunk of furniture I am

using to type these words. I havent checked what day American thanksgiving fell on that year, but it could have been no more than six weeks later that great aunt Lucy was gazing with rapture into the catamount's eyes, soothing words of welcome. Whump!

You're wondering how she got its ears in her bag. I dont know. She carried the secret below the yew in the little St Stephen's churchyard. Perhaps we should reconstruct the last part of the story for her.

Imagine great aunt Lucy imagining herself Maldonada, only girl with pluck enough to escape the Indian beseiged colonial town of Buenas Ayres in 1536. So persistent were the natives that of 2000 citizens 1800 are said to have died of starvation, and Maldonada, calculating the odds, decided that she had nothing to lose by leaping the walls to look for roots along the river. As she neared the lost field it began to snow, becoming so silent not even her footsteps informed her of the way. It grew dark, and she found shelter in a small, crude lean-to floored with straw. Exhausted, she lay down and immediately slept.

A rubbing noise woke her. Outside she heard the crash of snow slithering off trees, and the ground shook with a thumping regularity. It stopped. She gathered her thin cape around her and looked up. Peering in through the door of the shelter was a puma. The cat stepped inside, followed by three cubs. Together they lay down beside Maldonada and began to lick themselves in the familiar way. Soon they were all asleep.

Great aunt Lucy thought instantly of a name for the baleful face gazing in at her. Ned. Ned stared and stared. Cougars are generally shy, and although they sometimes like to follow a human being along a trail until the lights of home, it's more out of curiosity than anything else. And although cougars have attacked children, it is almost always because the animal is sick or injured in some painful way. Of course Ned was not necessarily a healthy cougar, and when aunt Lucy was suddenly revealed more of him she thought him decidedly lean. Imagine her then with her shotgun shaking in her hand, a sensitive cougar face staring in through fragrant boughs, the flat whumping of snow piles outside . . .

. . . She couldn't have shot him in the face. First because we have the ears intact, and second because she had fallen in love. She wanted to pull him in beside her on the burning straw, to stroke and pull at his deep soft fur. If we can imagine as much for her, we can imagine as much for the weary cougar, wet from melting snow and his icy swim. Lucy moved first.

Took off her mittens. Held out her hand and rubbed the forefinger and thumb together at the cat, at the same time purring and coaxing in his direction. Whether she said Here, puss, puss, pussy . . . or Meow, meow, meow, brrrrrrrrrup . . . we won't ever know, but it's certain the panther was hypnotized by the great aunt's invitation. Stranger still, the beast seemed incapable of ignoring the great aunt's implorings, and against what can only be feline better judgement it actually began to sidle her way. With one finger firmly arched about the trigger of the shotgun in her lap, she secured a page in her little travelling sketchpad and with a nearby pencil began to sketch the panther's serene visage by light of kerosene. Her eyes travelled, and pencil followed, down his sleek frame, forepaw to ribbed belly to muscular rear haunches and, half in shadow, his downy penis, trembling.

All this in the dark beneath eons of stars.

Whump!

A group of citizens came to get Maldonada after a treaty was struck, and the governor of the little city tried her for treason and desertion. Found guilty, she was taken out to the forest and chained to a tree where, it was hoped, she would be eaten by wild animals. Two days later, when deputies arrived to pack the bones in a bag, they were confronted by a snarling female puma. In the distance, Maldonada stood unharmed. Two days the animal had protected Maldonada from certain, savage death. Since that time, Argentinians have called the puma *amigo del cristiano*, for it proved, by its judicious watch, Maldonada's innocence.

What followed is indescribable. Aunt Lucy began to sing a little song. What immortal hand or eye, she sang back and forth to herself, like my grandmother used to sing Bird thou never wert day in day out. What immortal hand or eye, she sang, fixing Ned in the eye, what immortal hand or eye? Beneath her straw was crackling, hand or eye, hand or eye? Outside drip drip drip drip, a landscape of scratched records. A great whump of snow pitched onto the shed's roof, collapsing the branches around her. Aaiieeeeeee! she cried.

POWOOOOOOM! POWOOOOOOO!! the two barrels sounded.

* * *

Ned was beside her, licking her shoulder through prickly blasted needles. He looked up as he licked, slurp slurp slurp slowly up and down her arm, purring. She relaxed. Ned, she whispered. A cold shard of snow dropped from the tangle's peak down her back. Oooo! she wriggled. Ned backed away.

I'm sorry. He licked her outstretched hand. You're cold. He blinked his shaggy eyelids. She began to rub his arched shaggy forehead and scratch his neck, almost absentmindedly, searching his eyes. The animal crept forward, and as she scratched and rubbed, sometimes heartily which made him flinch, he began to lean against her. And slid to the ground.

He was not well. His purring broken, sometimes he seemed to cough and sneeze. Paws were badly cut and wet. Great aunt Lucy plucked her mittens from the burning straw and slipped them over his forepads. He made no motion to escape. She rubbed him down until her cape was sodden. Everything was cold and wet. The collapsed boughs with their blades of frozen snow, a damp wind curling out of the noisy sea, the great shivering body beside her in flickering kerosene, moaning. She cradled the animal in her arms and began to rock him gently.

O Ned, O Ned, she whispered, over and over, if only you could speak, if only you could tell me everything.

Hollowing a little nest in the boughs and piling a few rails against the storm, she crept around the animal and curled up between his legs. He was already asleep, his loose belly heaving. Rocked so, aunt Lucy too dozed off. The wet wind raged all night.

When she woke, shivering, his old body was stiff, his lips curled back over long yellow teeth. She gathered her skirts about her. Ned, Ned, she whispered. He was gone. Where she had slept, at the small of her back, it was still warm. She burrowed deeper, tucked her hands between her legs, and stared up through the whistling clouds.

He had saved her life. As his heat trickled away into the howling darkness, hers was sustained and thickened by their wet, hot love. She touched the last warm patch of fur, stroked it. Ned, Ned, she heard herself say. She hadn't even known.

Later that morning she used her knife before lifting him gently over the cliff with rocks tied to his legs. The bright barrel of the shotgun arced after him into the sea.

Whump. Whump! The aroused forest began to thaw again and drip.

ANSWERS

1. Parkman's book was *Champlain*.
2. Henley's single leg was responsible for his friend Robert Louis Stevenson's invention of Long John Silver in *Treasure Island*. His daughter, who died when she was five, inspired J. M. Barrie to fashion from her grace and charm the lovable Wendy of *Peter Pan*.
3. If you remembered that the Big Snow was 1916, then you are right. Actually, the incidents recalled in this story took place in 1932, the year when another incredible snowfall challenged the 1916 record, but melted before it really had a chance.

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