

A PUMA FOR LUCILLE

Lucille refused to discuss her trouble with friends or family, not even with Father Menendez. What could a naive young priest tell her about marriage? And friends might want to deluge her with sympathy, while any family member she turned to would likely be embarrassed. In the end she confided solely in Harriet who could always be counted on to offer solutions however impractical they might be.

On Wednesday she called Harriet in New Mexico to tell her about the misplaced check. While paying their monthly bills she'd stacked the stamped envelopes on the desk near a dictionary, kept handy when she read assignments Frank meted out from his dog-eared collection of *The Great Books of the Western World*. The dictionary got a lot of use; Lucille was determined to build her vocabulary hoping Frank would stop calling her an ignoramus.

That morning she'd just looked up "inharmonious" when the doorbell rang. She grabbed one of the envelopes to mark her place and went to find a young woman sobbing on the front porch. She pointed to an idling blue Honda and a bloody orange bundle crumpled against the curb and wailed, "It ran right in front of me!"

Lucille had forgotten she'd let Agnes out. In the ensuing eruption of grief she forgot about the envelope in the dictionary. Only after getting nailed with the penalty charge on their Master Card did she remember.

"Good God!" Frank raved. "How could you be that stupid?"

He believed in an Eleventh Commandment, Frank did—Thou shalt not pay one cent of interest—ranking it even higher than the other ten. The fate of Lucille’s beloved Tabby had absolutely no bearing.

Lucille knew she wasn’t actually stupid. She’d earned high marks in high school and college—once she’d made the dean’s list. Truth be told—and this was her sore spot—she believed she was smarter than she was talented. When Harriet had to write a paper on Joyce’s *Ulysses* she asked Lucille to help her explain what made the novel great. Lucille read as much as she could stand, including Molly Bloom’s long unpunctuated soliloquy, before deciding the novel wasn’t all that great. *Ulysses* was merely the result of a great writer showing off. Harriet ran with that and earned a B+.

But “ignorant” just might apply on some level. Even in college, her major being art, Lucille had read little of substance. Growing up on a Wisconsin dairy farm, youngest of six children, she had scant time for reading and not much to read, aside from dairy supplies catalogs, magazines, comics, and the Bible. Compared to Frank she probably was ignorant.

In fact, Lucille had come to view Frank’s intellect as the crux of their problem. Frank was an only child. During his formative years, his affluent Georgia parents had traveled with him to several foreign countries. Frank spoke three languages and was revered at his college by both students and faculty. He wore his doctorate like a general wore stars. Whenever he passed he expected the world to come to attention and salute.

Ironically, in college Harriet had been the lost soul Lucille now deemed herself to be. Lucille had been the self-assured one, chiding her wayward roommate with clever remarks like,

“Love you, girlfriend, but why does everything you touch turn into Chernobyl?” Harriet’s chaotic life was glutted with an excess of booze, drugs, and sex. One fiasco involving all three had resulted in an abortion that Lucille helped pay for. Lucille worried that Harriet could wind up dying of AIDS, a drug overdose, or some botched S&M rite.

But bless her reckless heart, Harriet never once broke stride. Lucille couldn’t help but admire her stubborn fearlessness, and Harriet reciprocated by crediting Lucille with shepherding her through college and out into the real world. Now, ironically, Lucille was the one floundering.

Each time they talked over the phone, Harriet listened to Lucille’s latest grievance with growing outrage. “It’s time to go over the wall, girlfriend,” she kept advising. “Time to get the hell out before that slimy eel sucks all the juice from your soul and turns you into a zombie.”

“You mean a divorce,” Lucille said, the day after Frank called her stupid. “I am still Catholic, you know.”

“A synonym for hypocrite?”

Lucille couldn’t help but laugh. Harriet believed all religions could be lumped under the heading of Humongous Con Game.

“Come live with me, girlfriend. Restore your vitality. Concentrate on your painting. Forget that pompous asshole. You’ll love it up on this mountain.”

“You’re not serious.”

“We’ll fix up a bedroom for your studio. Fort Drummond has bucoo galleries where you can display your stuff. In no time you’ll be famous.”

Lucille laughed even harder. Although she had sold an odd painting here and there, she knew her talent had strict limits. On the other hand, if she could devote full time to her art . . . the idea was certainly tempting. But she had to confess her scant savings wouldn't sustain her for long.

“Cut it out,” Harriet said. “The last thing I need is more money. Sarge took care of that.”

“God, I think you really are serious.”

“It'll be like old times. Except this time it'll be me bailing you out of a jam.”

“I'm not in a jam. I'm just fucking miserable.”

“Sounds like a jam to me, amigo. How soon can you get here?”

Lucille wasted no time giving her notice as a graphic artist with a mail-order company. She rented a U-Haul trailer and loaded it with her clothes, paintings, art supplies, and a treasured bronze bust of Monet she'd found at a yard sale. She was all packed when Frank came home from the college. She met him at the front door.

He stood there stroking his goatee, gazing quizzically over the top of frameless glasses at the yellow trailer hooked to her Ford Escort. Frank was handsome. He dressed stylishly, parted his blond hair in the middle, and his blade-like nose looked straight out of the Roman conquest. He labored at always maintaining an air of dignity. But at this moment he resembled a man who'd dressed for the opera only to find himself witnessing a burlesque.

Lucille spoke softly, pleased that her voice remained steady and her eyes stayed fixed on Frank's face. She'd rehearsed her short, blunt sentences for days, even written some down.

Now they came together like tongue-and-groove flooring. She felt no anger, no vindictiveness—that was all behind her—just relief. Frank was speechless. He remained so when she bid him a final farewell. The rush she felt as she drove away was exhilarating.

At the edge of San Diego she stopped at a liquor store to buy a half-dozen bottles of Cuervo Gold. Tooling along Routes 8 and 10, destined for the Land of Enchantment, she hummed happily to an old CD of Bob Dylan singing “Blowin’ in the Wind.”

* * *

A little before dawn on the morning after Lucille’s arrival, Harriet woke her. There was someone she wanted her to meet. Lucille was hung over. They’d done tequila shots with beer chasers and dipped guacamole late into the night. At some point Harriet persuaded Lucille to remove the gold band from her finger. It felt like an amputation at first, but as the night wore on the wound began to heal.

Harriet led her through the house to the screened-in back porch that looked out on a gravel and flagstone courtyard enclosed by a low adobe wall. A wide double-gate in the back of the wall opened onto a dirt road that wound up to the house through a forest of oak, juniper, and pine. Lucille wore a flimsy pink nightie and shivered in the chill mountain air. Harriet had on gray sweats and sandals. Without makeup her face was ghostly, her strawberry-blond hair in disarray. But her green eyes lit up as she nodded beyond the screen.

Once her vision adjusted, Lucille was able to make out a shadowy figure crouched statue-like in the opening to the courtyard. After a minute the figure rose and moved stealthily forward, stopped to stare, moved forward again, stopped again, then padded quickly up to the

porch steps.

Lucille was captivated by the undersized feline face, erect rounded ears, and long whiskers. With its thick chest, sleek grayish-brown coat, plump padded paws, the cougar looked as exquisitely proportioned as any creature she'd ever seen.

“Good morning, Prince Puma,” Harriet said, in a sleep-husky voice.

The cat ducked his head to snap up something in his mouth. The porch light was off, but enough light from the kitchen spilled over for the cat to view them through the screen. He showed no alarm at Harriet's voice, but gazed questioningly at Lucille, comically so with that plucked chicken dangling from his jaws.

“Meet my friend Lucille,” Harriet said. “She adores cats.”

The cougar turned and retreated a few steps before pausing for a backward glance. Then he broke into a graceful lope, ears twitching, long, thick, black-tipped tail rippling. A tremor snaked along Lucille's shoulders as she watched the big cat slip through the opening and head up the dirt road to veer off into the trees.

“Aren't they dangerous?” she asked.

Harriet shrugged. “If you run across one out hiking, stand your ground and make yourself as big as possible.” She stretched her arms above her head. “Never run. Never, never, *never* run. Do nothing to look like prey. In the unlikely event you're attacked, shout and fight back. If all you have are your bare hands, use them. Aim for the eyes. At all cost stay on your feet.”

“Is it wise to feed him?” Lucille asked.

“Wise?”

“What would Sarge say?”

Harriet sighed. “I got lonely after the sergeant checked out. As much as I love this place it’s no fun living up here by myself. Prince Puma appeared one morning like he’d sought me out. Do you believe in reincarnation?” She chuckled at Lucille’s blank stare. “He probably smelled the bacon I was cooking for breakfast. I’m hoping you’ll want to paint his portrait.”

“Not a bad idea,” Lucille said.

Sarge had built his beloved Santa Fe-style adobe house on eighty wooded acres that adjoined a vast national wilderness area stretching from southwestern New Mexico into Arizona. Lucille had the run of the place. To earn her keep, she took on as many housekeeping chores as Harriet would allow.

On her morning hikes she often passed mule deer, alert but unafraid, grazing in meadows flowing with purple and yellow wildflowers. All around, rugged mountain peaks speared the sky. Lucille gazed in awe at the spellbinding views of spires and arches, cliffs and crannies, blue shadows and light. She couldn’t wait to capture it on canvas.

When Harriet first began seeing Sarge, not long after she graduated from college, Lucille warned her friend not to let things get out of hand. When Harriet decided to marry Sarge, Lucille waved a red flag. Not only did she question the sincerity of Harriet’s feelings, she questioned Sarge’s emotional stability, since he suffered from lingering effects of the Vietnam war. And he was more than thirty years older than Lucille.

But Sarge was also rich. After twenty years he’d retired from the Marines to start a

business in San Diego, manufacturing a gizmo he'd invented that enhanced battlefield night vision. When he decided to sell the business, he asked Harriet to accompany him to his home state of New Mexico. Harriet didn't hesitate.

Turned out Lucille was wrong about Sarge: Harriet really did love him. And he worshiped her. They had ten blissful years together. Until the day Sarge strolled into the woods right after supper, smoked half a Camel, knelt down beneath an oak tree, stuck his .45 into his mouth, and squeezed the trigger. A man of few words, Sarge left no note.

Over Frank's protests, Lucille drove from San Diego to attend the funeral. She offered to stay as long as Harriet needed her. Harriet was grateful. Her means of dealing with grief was to start smoking again and pound the hell out of a beat-up piano she'd found at an auction sale. She played boogie woogie like she was fighting off an assailant, eyes shut to dam her tears, lips parted, head thrown back, body rocking to the rhythm.

At the funeral, Lucille met Garret Abraham. Harriet's closest neighbor lived in a small trailer a mile or so away on an acre of bear grass, yucca, and cholla. The trailer was wedged into one corner of the national forest boundary and Harriet's property. A disabled vet, Garret used the opportunity the funeral afforded to distribute handwritten cards featuring a caricature of a beggar with a tin cup, wryly billing Garret as a jack of all trades, master of none.

Besides selling Sarge firewood he'd cut, Garret had built the adobe wall encircling the courtyard, laid the flagstone, spread the gravel, and tackled myriad other odd jobs. He was gaunt and sinewy, sported a gnarly graying beard, cryptic tattoos, and tied his long greasy hair in a pony tail. He looked to be a few years younger than Harriet and Lucille, both in their late

thirties. Lucille considered his smell—akin to a horse barn baking in summer heat—to be his most prominent feature.

After moving in, Lucille began to suspect Harriet had something going with Garret. Two or three times a week she drove off in her Jeep Renegade without saying where she was headed. When she returned several hours later—limp, sweaty, glassy-eyed—she always took a leisurely shower.

One morning Lucille peeked into Harriet's bedroom to ask if she'd like to hike up to the point—she wanted to snap a picture of the canyon in preparation for a painting. Harriet declined as usual, then warned her to be on the alert for Garret.

“On the alert?”

Harriet sat up on the side of her bed and stretched. “Garret is deeply spiritual. Don't be surprised to see him sitting up in those rocks looking out over the canyon like some naked Buddha, smoking weed and recharging his karma. He often eats breakfast up there.” She fished around for her house-shoes. “He thinks you're a prude. Might try to shock you—guy's hung like a bull elk.”

“And you would know that how?”

Harriet gave her a sly wink.

Lucille decided to avoid the overlook and stick to the less exotic trails.

She returned from her hike to find Harriet dancing around the living room, squealing like a teenager at a rock concert. She'd had a phone call from her Oregon high school, inviting her to her class's twentieth graduation reunion. “It's next week. And guess who tracked me

down for the invite?”

Lucille shook her head.

“Aaron Hildebrand! Told you about Aaron—remember?”

“One of many, girlfriend, I seem to recall.”

“Aaron and I were such dip-shits. Oh my God, the carnal delights we discovered in the back of his dad’s station wagon. Some we actually invented.”

“Better than Garret?”

Harriet only smiled. “Aaron joined the Navy right after graduation. I went off to college. He was married for a time. Not any more.”

“Which means you’ll be at the reunion.”

“Can you handle things here for a week or so?”

“What about Garret?”

Harriet blinked. “Garret? I don’t expect you to take care of Garret . . . unless you want to.”

Lucille laughed at that.

There were chickens in the freezer for Prince Puma, Harriet said. If Lucille ran out, she should drive down to Fort Drummond and restock. Harriet showed her the loaded .38 she kept in her bedroom. Lucille refused to touch it.

Early in the morning Lucille drove Harriet to the El Paso Airport—a three-hour trip one way. When she returned that afternoon the house was eerily silent. Following a light supper, she sat in a rocker on the back porch, sipping wine and admiring the sunset. She hoped the

cougar might make an appearance—by now they'd grown familiar with each other. By nine o'clock that hadn't happened. She locked the door, set a plucked chicken on top of the freezer to thaw, and went to bed.

She was up before sunrise. She'd just stepped out the screen door to place the chicken on the flagstone when the cougar slipped through the open gate behind her. Before she was aware of his presence he'd advanced alarmingly close.

Lucille backed away from the chicken, careful not to make a sudden move. When the cougar stopped to gaze at her with an inquiring expression, she thought to raise both arms. The big cat had a musty cave-like scent. With enough nerve, Lucille could actually reach out and stroke his fur. For what seemed an interminable time they stood observing each other. At last the cougar gave a soft *mowwww*, grabbed the chicken and loped away.

After her hike, Lucille showered and ate breakfast as usual. She unplugged the phone before going to her studio. Harriet had allotted her a spacious corner room with large rectangular windows facing south and west. She slid a CD into the player and removed a half-finished landscape painting from the easel. She replaced it with the largest canvas—forty by sixty inches—in her wooden rack.

For a time she stood motionless before the window, gazing out at layered brown mountains stretching to the horizon. Ottmar Liebert's flamenco guitar helped set the mood. At last she slipped into her flowered smock and turned to the high chest, where glass-fronted drawers housed her painting paraphernalia. On a wooden stool she arranged half a dozen brushes. She dabbed her palette with titanium white, crimson alizarin, cadmium lemon,

Prussian blue, burnt umber. Payne's gray for a subtle base, a touch of linseed oil. In her mind she visualized the composition before making a quick sketch of the cougar. Awash in ecstasy, she then began to paint.

Thus began a daily ritual. Lucille fed the cougar each morning, and after breakfast went to her studio to spend hours re-creating the magnificent creature on canvas. With each passing day she felt the communion between them grow stronger. One day she went so far as to allow the cougar to tug a chicken from her grasp, an experience that left her orgiastically drained.

* * *

One evening, just before dark, a Department of Game and Fish pickup drove up to the house. From the screened-in porch Lucille watched a wiry, narrow-hipped man step down from the cab. She set her wine glass down and went out to see what he wanted.

He told her his name was Steve Jurado and asked for Harriet. Lucille explained why Harriet wasn't there. He wore a white straw cowboy hat, blue Western-cut shirt, black Wranglers, cowboy boots. A holstered gun hung from his wide black leather belt. He asked if she'd seen a mountain lion roaming about.

"Mountain lion?" Lucille thought it best not to seem unaware of the cougar. "You know . . . one evening I did see something. It was pretty dark. Thought it might be a coyote or one of those javelinas."

"This one is a renegade," Jurado said. "Grabbed some campers' fox terrier right under their noses. Big fella, not at all shy."

"Hope the dog is okay."

Jurado shook his head with a grimace.

“How sad. Well . . . we don’t have any pets.”

“But you still need to be careful. This is likely a case of familiarity breeding contempt.

If you know somebody’s feeding this lion, please report it.”

“Yes . . . of course.”

He turned to leave, then swung back to extend his hand. His calloused palm felt warm and dry, strong but gentle. Lucille imagine how that same hand might feel caressing her breast.

“If you don’t mind me asking,” he said, “do you expect to be here awhile?”

She smiled. “Too soon to tell.”

“Well . . . hope we’ll see more of each other, Lucille.”

She watched him walk to the truck. She liked his mannered swagger, macho as it might be. Jurado was attracted to her it seemed. He was nice. He wasn’t wearing a ring, didn’t look married. Would it matter to him that she was? Something to think about.

The following morning, with Steve Jurado in mind, Lucille closed the gate and didn’t leave a chicken out. The cougar easily jumped the wall. Lucille hung back in the kitchen, watching with mixed emotions as the cat sniffed around the steps and scratched tentatively on the screen door. After a time he slunk away like a pouting child.

Two days later Jurado returned. Lucille invited him inside, but he elected to stand on the back porch. He didn’t offer his hand this time. He stood with his boots apart, hands on hips, lips compressed.

“Anything wrong?” Lucille asked.

“You acquainted with Garret Abraham?”

“Lives in the trailer, I believe.”

“Not any more . . . he’s dead.”

Lucille stiffened. “*Dead?*”

“That mountain lion I told you about?”

“Yes?”

“Killed Garret . . . early this morning.”

“Oh my God!”

“I can spare you the details.”

“No . . . please. I’m not squeamish about these things.” Although her heart was pounding like a roofer’s hammer.

“State Police Crime Lab is performing an autopsy. But to me it looks like Mr. Abraham tried to run from the lion.”

“And . . . it chased him?”

“Chased him, caught him, brought him down like a deer.” Jurado made claws of his hands. He raked his belly, bared his teeth, took a fierce bite of air. “Propane delivery man found human remains not far from the trailer. Garret . . . running for home most likely. Running from the overlook. Liked to sit bareassed up there I hear.”

“Yes . . . I heard that too.”

“Parts of him were . . . consumed. Other parts the lion likely buried. Like cats do. We’re trying to locate those parts for his family. . . . Own a firearm?”

Lucille shook her head. “I carry pepper spray on my hikes.”

“I advise against hiking for now. Try not to be out early morning or after dark.”

“Whatever you say.” She hesitated. “But why? A little dog . . . but why would a mountain lion attack a grown man? Because he ran—I get that—but why would Garret run?”

“Wild animals can be unpredictable. The lion might’ve done something to scare Garret.” Jurado looked down at his boots, then raised his eyes to meet hers. His bushy black mustache belonged in a smoky border cantina. “I’m betting someone fed him. Might’ve been Garret, though he should’ve known better. Piece of sausage was found at the site. Toast. Pie pan. That lion was not only hungry . . . that lion was seething with contempt.”

“I’ll be careful.”

“Once a cat tastes human flesh . . . this one’ll likely return to dig up what he buried. What we’ll do is set a snare. I’ll keep you advised.”

“Thanks . . . thank you,” Lucille said. She searched Jurado’s face for some sign of warmth. Today he was all business.

Watching Jurado drive away, she felt a little sick to her stomach. Harriet had fed the cougar, but Lucille had stopped feeding him. Out scrounging for food, the cat may have been enticed to the overlook by the smell of Garret’s breakfast. Jurado was probably right—something the cougar did panicked Garret. Now Garret was dead. Lucille was sure she was responsible.

The sun was setting and a cooling breeze wafted down from the heights, bringing with it the scent of pine. She shielded her eyes and peered out over the adobe wall. Was the cougar

crouched there in the trees, watching her at this very moment, hurting and resentful? She caught herself actually sniffing the air for *his* scent.

She couldn't concentrate on her painting. At supper time she forced herself to eat some brie with French bread and a Cabernet. During the night she got up more than once and walked barefoot out to the screened porch to scan the moonlit courtyard. As bad as she felt for Garret, she felt just as bad for the cougar, its instincts muddled by human meddling.

In the morning she expected the cat to appear in the courtyard. But it was Jurado who showed up to tell her the lion had indeed returned to the overlook. He was wily enough to avoid the snare, Jurado added with grudging admiration, but a load of buckshot had found its mark. "He's even bigger than I figured. One-fifty at least. Maybe more. Left a blood trail. Hounds'll track him."

Jurado's guarded tone told Lucille he had some purpose in sharing these details. "You think I'm the one feeding him, don't you?"

He pursed his lips. "Are you?"

The lie teetered on her tongue before she sucked it back. Jurado smiled thinly at her silence and let the screen door slam shut.

That night in bed, squirming onto one side then the other, she kept seeing the wounded cougar out there in the wild, struggling to understand what was happening in his world. Shortly before dawn she was awakened by the distant cacophony of baying hounds. She scrambled out of bed and in a fuzzy haze threw on a robe and hurried to the back porch. The courtyard was empty.

She was finishing breakfast when Harriet called to let her know what a great time she was having. She wanted to stay in Oregon awhile longer—if that was okay.

“No problemo,” Lucille said.

“Aaron owns a fishing lodge near Coos Bay. He brought pictures but wants me to see his place in person, wants to take me fishing. He’s got this godalmighty boat. You should see the size of some of the fish he’s caught.”

“Sounds like things are moving right along.”

“How’re you and Prince Puma making out?”

Lucille was expecting this. “Haven’t seen him lately.”

“Oh?” Harriet said. “Guess I shouldn’t have worried.”

“Worried?”

“I was afraid he might start liking you better than me.”

“Not a chance, girlfriend.”

“Seen Garret?”

“Nope.”

The cougar returned the following morning. Lucille was in her robe and house-shoes, curled up in the porch rocker with a cup of coffee. The first trace of vermillion revealed the cat as a gray phantom in the center of the road. His head seemed tilted at an unnatural angle. He paused to look all around before coming on, treading gingerly as if each step brought pain.

When she glimpsed headlights at the crest of the road, about fifty yards beyond the cougar, Lucille set her cup down. The lights switched off. The vehicle backed out of sight.

Lucille jumped up.

She kept watching the road, expecting Jurado to appear on foot with his shotgun. The cougar stopped and looked to his right. Lucille looked the same way. For a minute she saw nothing but the forest's impenetrable gloom. Then she detected a slight movement and Jurado emerged from behind a pine tree.

Lucille flung open the screen door and ran straight for the cougar. Waving her arms, she shouted, "Shoo! Shoo! *Shoooo!*"

At the gate she saw the cat's rear drop. Saw him crouch, saw the tendons tighten in his blood-spattered legs. Peripherally she saw Jurado's shotgun jerk up. He yelled something. She kept running even when one of her house-shoes flew off. Even when the sound of the blast knocked her off stride. She only stopped running when the lion shuddered and collapsed.

She skidded to her knees a few feet from the motionless form. Jurado cocked another shell into the chamber and advanced to stand over the animal, the barrel resting against its ear. At last he sank to the ground with a soft whimper. He laid the shotgun aside and reached out to caress the cat's head. Lucille pictured her father saying goodnight to her when she was a child.

She tried to rise but lacked the strength. Then Jurado whimpered again. A plaintive sound like a puppy trapped in a plastic bag might make. On hands and knees Lucille made her way over to him.

"I'm sorry," she said.

His eyes slanted at her from a contorted face. She rose to her knees and put one hand on his arm.

“I’m so sorry,” she said again.

He didn’t seem to hear.

END