

The Cougar

by Dave Clapper

Johnny puts another whiskey in front of me. Except for him, me, and Petey, the bar's empty. "You hear about that up in Wilmette?" he asks.

"No, what?" I say.

"A cougar. People say they saw a cougar."

"Bullshit."

"No shit. Was in the *Sun Times* this morning."

"*Sun Times* ain't been shit since Royko left."

"Royko's dead twenty years."

"What I'm saying."

"Anyway. First cougar seen in Illinois in a hundred years."

"Uh huh. Sounds like the *Sun Times*, all right."

"I was a cougar," says Petey from his barstool, "I wouldn't go to Wilmette."

"No?" I say.

"No. I'd go to Eau Claire."

"Wisconsin?"

"No, fucking Delaware. Yeah, Wisconsin."

"What the hell a cougar want in Eau Claire?" Johnny asks.

"More bars and churches every block than any city in the United States."

"What the hell a cougar want with bars and churches?"

"Okay, so not a cougar. But maybe me. What else you want? Get a feeling of... of... what."

"Prayerful drunkenness?" I ask.

"Asshole," says Petey. "You know... like family, but not."

"Belonging?"

"Yeah, belonging. You're a regular or you're part of the flock. Probably both."

"Petey," I say.

"What," he says.

"With due respect..."

"What."

"You're a fucking idiot."

"Fuck you."

"A passenger on the short bus."

"You're making church look a hell of a lot better than the bars."

We hear a siren go by and sip our drinks.

"A cougar," I mutter. "*Sun Times* is full of shit."

"What it said is all," says Johnny, and tops off my glass.

Squealing brakes then, the siren didn't go too far. Car doors slamming, too.

"The fuck?" says Johnny.

"Drugs, I bet," says Petey. We all nod. "Won't find drugs in Eau Claire."

"Fuck you and Eau Claire," I say. "I bet they got all the crystal meth there. High school kids who can't go to the bars and hate the fucking churches. I bet they're all cooking it up in Ma and Pa's kettles."

Petey doesn't say anything, just flips me the bird.

And then, gunshots, real close by.

"The fuck?" all three of us yell, and duck and cover, like we learned to do back when the Soviets were going to invade any day now.

Nothing happens for a while, no sounds. Johnny's under the bar, and me and Petey are under our stools. We all stand up slow, eyes big. We probably look like the Three Stooges.

"The fuck?" Johnny whispers.

"You think we should do?" says Petey. None of us say anything for a minute. It's still quiet outside.

"I'm going out there," I say.

"Not me," says Johnny.

"Didn't say you. Said me. Petey?"

"I don't know."

"Come on, Petey. I'll buy next round."

"Make it two rounds."

"Okay. Two. Asshole." We shake on it. "Let's go."

We creep across the bar and peek out the windows. There's cop cars skewed and slanted all over the street. A couple fat cops are walking around like they're wondering how much longer 'til they can go to Spunky Dunkers for coffee and a glazed.

"Looks okay," I say. Petey nods. We go out the door. People're coming out of apartments, looking around.

"Going on?" I ask one of the cops.

"Police business," he says.

"Shot a cougar," says a guy standing nearby.

"Fuck you, *Sun Times*-reading asshole," I say.

"*Sun Times* sucks ass since Royko left," he says, "but they shot a motherfucking cougar." I like this guy.

"A cougar?" I look at the cop.

He gives a big, weary eye roll. "Yeah, a cougar, all right? A bunch of people called in, said a big fucking cat, mountain lion, cougar, bobcat, something."

"No shit," I say.

"No shit," says the cop. "And we call bullshit, because, come on, a fucking wildcat? Only wildcat around here is the Northwestern mascot." We all nod, as soberly as we can. "But one car comes, checks it out. Grabowski, I think. And there's a fucking cougar. So he calls backup. What's he gonna do, right? So we all come, thinking he's fucking with us. But we get here, and there's the cougar and there's Grabowski and what're we gonna do? So we, uh... we... the word?"

We all shrug.

"You know, the word. Making a ring around the cat."

"Encircle?" I say.

The cop looks at me. "You a fucking engineer? Encircle? The fuck?"

"This guy's your brother, huh," I say to Petey. Petey whacks me on the head.

"Surround?" says the guy from the street.

"Yeah, surround. We surround the damned cat, and it backs into a corner. But then, son of a bitch leaps at Vrdolyak—"

"Fast Eddie?" says Petey.

"Fuck you," I say. "Vrdolyak's older than Royko."

"His grand-nephew," says the cop.

"No shit?" says the street guy.

"No shit," says the cop. "So it jumps at Vrdolyak, and Jackson pops it."

"Jackson?" I say.

"He's new," says the cop. His nameplate says Grobnik. We all nod.
"So Jackson pops the cougar."

"To save Vrdolyak," I say.

"Right," says Grobnik. None of us say anything for a while. We hear the chatter and hiss of other police radios.

"He anything like his grand-uncle?" I say.

Grobnik looks at me. "You notice my gun's still in its holster." We all nod.

Four cops, all big, one of 'em black, come out, hauling a carcass. It ain't as cute as Willy Wildcat, and it doesn't have on a purple shirt or carry a megaphone. It's not taking the Purple to Pasadena. It looks, even if it weren't shot in the head, half-dead and starving. We all watch it being carried, all of us looking sad, even Grobnik.

"A hundred years?" I say to Petey.

"What the *Sun Times* said."

"*Sun Times* is bullshit," says the street guy, and I like him a little better, but also a lot less.

"Maybe some respect," I say to him. He nods real quick, like maybe he's had some of that Eau Claire meth.

"You think it means?" Petey says.

"A hundred years. I don't know," I say. "What else been a hundred years?"

We all think about it, but it doesn't take long.

"Cubs," we all say at the same time.

"Jackson just shot the motherfucking Cubs," says Grobnik.

The four cops stagger the dead cat into the back seat of a squad car.

"How much that weigh?" Grobnik yells.

"A ton," one of 'em gasps back.

And I look at Jackson and see his hard face, and how it looks like it's going to crack like a sidewalk. And I think the cougar weighs more. A lot more.

