

Blood Orange, A Novella

by Tom Maremaa

In the grip of a bad dream, she bolted awake, thinking she had heard the night sounds of a tomcat crawling around her property.

It was some dreaded hour before dawn; she had no idea when. Her small, frail body was stiff, her breasts swollen and sore to the touch. Perhaps it had to do with the medicine she was taking; the bed felt hard as stone. Not too many days left, she told herself, without pity. Get used to it, kiddo. He was still fast asleep, curled up in the sheets she had wrapped around him after making love. As always, he was undisturbed by the natural order.

She coughed and spat blood. It was impossible to breathe; something had turned the air foul. She got up slowly and stretched out her body, feeling the pain, before walking in the dark toward the front window and shoving open the latch with a flick of her bony wrist. Sticking her head outside, she panted and gasped for a handful of fresh, clean air.

All of a sudden she could breathe again. Looking up, she spotted an array of summer stars, bright and unusually vibrant in the night sky: the constellation of Orion, the Hunter, in full, dramatic view. Craning her neck, she picked up the sound of rustling in the bushes behind the house. The horses were acting up; her dogs would soon begin barking.

"Listen. Hear it?"

"Hear what, baby?" said Clay, all hot and sweaty, waking up from a dream in which he was still inside the confines of Lompoc.

"The cat—in the hills."

"Yeah, right. Like that kid's story about the cat in the hat," he moaned. "Give it a rest, okay? 'Bout time to come back to bed, you with me?"

"For God's sake, this isn't about Dr. Seuss."

“Now if we had a kid,” said Clay, perking up, “we'd be singin' it a whole bookful of lullabies and nursery rhymes. Kid'd have no trouble falling asleep.”

“I'm talking about a real cat.”

Only she had heard the nightsounds of the animal roaming the hillside.

The mountain lion was crawling along the rim of the canyon in the thick of eucalyptus trees, hungry, lost, having strayed early that morning out of its natural habitat. The big cat, its piercing eyes the color of blood orange, stopped dead in its tracks for a moment and stood up on its hind legs. Baring its fangs, grabbing for air with its paws, it let out a fierce, savage growl.

When she had heard it the night before, she had almost panicked. Now her body suddenly tensed up, her jaw froze, and the muscles at the nape of her neck curled into knots. Judging by its roar, she knew the cat was not far way, much too close for comfort; she could feel its lurking presence, its primal need.

In the dry heat of August the growl moved like cinder sparks from a wild brushfire through the tall trees that encircled the town's outer edges. With all the force she could muster, her tiny body coiled behind the wheel, she slammed hard on the brakes of the pickup. Dirt flew off the windshield. And the vehicle came to an abrupt halt at the edge of the road. She wanted to see where it was, what it would do. Flirting with danger, she climbed out, standing on the tips of her toes, all five feet four of her, lean and dark, tanned head to foot from long hours of summer work on her ranch, and looked up and down the road in both directions. Just ahead she spotted two young men, a pair of joggers—she had to warn them. Running toward them, she stumbled and fell.

“Hey, you there—hey, watch out!” she cried in a shrill voice, then almost in a whisper. “It's coming. Don't you see it? Feel it? Hey—listen . . . please. Listen . . . you . . . ”

Her cries and pleadings went unnoticed. Hot sweat pouring down their backs, probably listening to the latest hit from Nirvana or Pearl

Jam blasting away on their Walkmans, the jogging pair seemed impervious to the roar of the cat. And to her warnings. Their ears were plugged up, filled with all the sonic rage of Eddie Vedder's deep, raspy voice. It was dusk now; the last faint light of the August sun setting over the ridge of the Valley. There's danger in the air, her instincts were telling her. She could feel the menace of the big cat, its defiance of all pleadings, all rationality in the name of hunger and predatory need. She threw up her hands, waving frantically at the joggers, flapping her short arms like a bird. But they never bothered to look up at her. She did not know, for the life of her, what she should do. The big cat was moving in closer for the kill. That—she knew. In a sprint, she ran back to the pickup at the side of the road as fast as her thin, short legs could carry her and when she got there leaned with both hands on the horn of the steering wheel. The blast stopped the jogging pair; they glanced up, looking nervously around them. And she sensed intuitively that the mountain lion, within that split second between pouncing and anticipating the blast of her horn, had retreated now into the darker reaches of the forest night.

* * *

To read further, Parts II and Part III of the novella, email me at <tom.maremaa@gmail.com> and I'll send them to you in PDF format.

