Cougar Attack

In the early morning darkness, a full-grown cougar quietly paced along a seldom-used cross-country ski trail. This was relatively new territory for the big cat. It had been pushed here, close to the town, by bigger and stronger rivals who were established in more remote areas of this Rocky Mountain National Park. The young cat had originally come here following the river valley and, although the unfamiliar and somewhat rank scent of human habitation often caused it to wince and leave certain areas alone, it had found and killed plenty of small game animals in its explorations.

The cougar was beginning to consider this territory (a heavily wooded tract reaching almost to the town) as its own. In its demeanor there was only the slightest trace of the initial caution that had accompanied its unwanted transfer into this new land. In fact, the young lioness moved and felt like the queen that it was.

As the cougar traveled along the trail, it could sense its nearby, unchallenged territorial markings hanging in the still air. Everything—the scent, the trail, the range—was perfect.

The dawn was about to rise. A light glow in the east caused the stars to fade. The snow became less radiant as the bright blue starlight no longer reflected off its crystalline surface.

Swirling mists of warm air were sent downward and upward as the cat steadily exhaled its slightly foul breath. Small prey animals like the rabbit, hiding ten feet from the trail, could feel/smell the tangy odor of cat. The rabbit, of-course, frozen in place, barely breathing, knew that any betrayal of position would mean death. So it remained that way until the cougar was well out of range.

It was January and the snow pack, compressed on the trails, was over 60 cm deep. Reaching down to touch the snow, an early-morning skier took a few deep breaths of the still, cold air. The snow was perfect. The top layer contained about 3 cm of new, soft snow. Putting her hand back into her mitt, she smiled to herself and prepared to take off down the trail. Soon the steady swish, swish of her skis entered the great stillness of that rocky mountain valley.

The cougar, too, liked the snow. It was smiling some happy-cat grin, as the soft snow helped to make movement silent, and the thinness of the top layer, made movement easy.

The female cougar was about three years old--and sleek. Its great weight, tied up in sinew, muscle, bone, fang, and claw, could be easily underestimated.

The skier, too, was female. And like the great cat, the skier was fit and firm. Both skier and cougar could easily keep a brisk, steady pace through the snowy woods. On this crisp and clear morning, the skier felt particularly strong; she had even altered her original plans so that her early-morning ski would take her further from town, along the seldom-used riverside trail. The exertion of cross-country skiing raised her metabolic rate, and she felt warm.

The cougar, at first, heard the sound of the skis. It was an unfamiliar sound, so with natural curiosity, the big cat turned to hone-in and follow the direction from which this sound was coming. Soon the cougar was only fifty meters away from the skier. The cougar, sheltered by the thick undergrowth that seemed to be holding up a patchy, low

wall of snow, received the full, down-trail vaporous scent that the female skier was exuding.

This scent was confusing. The cougar paused to let a few more molecules of odor penetrate its brain. Then, within a fraction of a moment, the scent triggered a series of animal neurons in that feline mind which concluded the brief puzzlement: "Yes," the brain said, "attack, kill, eat!"

Instantly and silently, the big cougar couched low, ears back, muscles forward, and began the stalk. As this tawny killing machine crept quickly closer and the smell of prey filled her nostrils, every cell and fiber vibrated with anticipation and commitment to gruesome act that must unfold if a predator (like itself) is to eat, live, and continue the species.

The skier paused, to catch her breath. So did the cat. A fraction of a moment went by when the cougar considered the target. Like all cats, it preferred moving targets: all might had been well; the cougar might have stopped the attack. The skier was, after all, a new and strange species of prey: there was considerable risk involved.

But the cougar was too close, too young, too powerful. As the skier pushed-off from her standstill, the cougar crouched down, as if pressing on a spring, and in an instant, gathered and focused all of its power for the great leap that would hit the skier. Then, in a slow-motion heartbeat, the motionless cougar dissolved and transformed itself into a guided missile of tawny, rippling fur, flesh, bone, tooth, and claw.

The skier turned around in a panic to see what frightening thing had crashed through the bushes behind her. But even as she was turning and five-alarm panic literally stopped her heart, the cougar's horrible, yellow forepaws and claws were reaching for the skier's face and throat. She swung her ski pole in a somewhat effective effort to divert this frontal attack, but was knocked over by the rock-like mass of the cougar's chest. As the young, attractive woman had rolled sideways and down, twisting in her bindings, skis flailing, she received several deep gashes to her face and right shoulder. The cougar had tried, but failed find the fatal death grip.

The skier, realizing in a slowed-down instant that she *could* move, felt her panic quickly dissipate, and she viciously yanked her feet out of her ski boots which were still firmly pinned to the long skis by the steel bindings. These skies had probably done more to foil the cougar's first attack than any other thing the skier had done in that gruesome instant.

The cougar was momentarily confused: this *animal* that it was attacking seemed somehow wrong. Nevertheless, the smell of the fresh, dark blood rising full into its nostril-brain path quickly obliterated these secondary thoughts. This predator was a proud descendant of its species: a disdainful huntress, with a vague, only-half-understood hatred of humankind. The great cat quickly gained its footing and composure and snarled like a chainsaw at the odd-shaped tangle of woman and skies that it saw struggling in the snow. Its ears flattened against its head; taut lips flared, revealing sharp yellow teeth; and its eyes narrowed and fixed intently on the bleeding woman.

The skier stood in a dramatic show of self-preservation ready to do something—anything—to save her life. She prayed, she yelled, she waved her arms in that brief moment before the cat leapt again at her blood-spattered upper body and face.

The skier spun around in a vain effort to avoid the attack. So, the cougar hit the woman's back and shoulder. The sleek wildcat almost slid off the smooth nylon of the

skier's jacket. But one of its forepaws, swinging madly forward, managed to get a grip on the young woman's chest.

The claws had easily ripped through the jacket and clothing and, after the subsequent, violet penetration of the skier's skin and tissue, were digging into the soft bones of the rib cage. The cougar was familiar with the feel of this firm grip; it was the same one it used on most of its large animal kills.

The skier, struggling on her knees in the blood-blotched snow, said a low, "Oh, my God" and used both hands and all her might trying to remove that dreadful paw from her breastbones. She could feel the hot pressure of the penetration, but she could not feel any real pain; in fact, she felt a mild ecstasy as the endorphins surged in her circulation. She could, however, hear the terrible ripping and scraping sound of claw and bone as the cougar struggled to gain a better hold and position. Both skier and cougar knew that the cougar must connect with its other paw and teeth if it was to complete its kill.

Soon, the cougar felt the advantage it had over its struggling victim, and the cougar dug deeper with its strong paw into the woman's chest. The strange punishment being dealt to the paw by those odd, frantic hands was essentially meaningless. The wild, savagely-focused cat swung its other paw around the skier's throat and in a half-choking instant it was over. The aorta had been ripped open and a fatal one-meter spray of bright red blood shot from the skier's torn neck. The struggle ended, and one of the last things the skier saw was that incredible fountain of her own blood.

The cougar must have been startled by the ease with which the fatal strike had come because it loosened its grip as the blood sprayed. Even in kills of young deer, it was never this easy and sudden.

The skier, freed from the death-grip, fell on her side. She instinctually put her hands to her open throat and actually managed to get up as the blood gushed through her fingers. She stood briefly, a horribly gory sight of ruined humanity; then she collapsed to her knees and her eyes closed. The young woman would never again know the pain and pleasures of this material world.

The body, itself, was not so instantly dead. It moved erratically and even tried to get up, back on its own two feet, once. The cougar watched this death routine and let it play out until the body was still and a fine white steam rose skyward from the corpse.

Three hours later, in the bright rocky mountain sunlight, two skiers coming down the same trail discovered the horrible scene and found the partially eaten body. The wary cougar had heard their noisy approach and was now hiding only a meter or two away from these awestruck, gibbering, and completely unwanted visitors. The cougar decided to wait until they had gone. But once they left, and the cougar had sniffed around the corpse, smelling these other human scents, it somehow lost its appetite, and so it left its kill, loped away through the undergrowth, mostly satisfied, to its hidden bed where the great, muscular cat would clean itself and then sleep soundly until late into the evening.