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The first time anybody around Sugar Creek knew for sure there was a bloodthirsty, savage-tempered wildcat in the territory was when one of them sneaked into Harm Groenwald's pasture and killed three of his prize lambs.

I never will forget the hair-raising chills that ran up and down my spine the morning I heard about it.

We had just finished breakfast at our house when we got the news. It had been one of the most peaceful breakfasts we had had in a long time. Charlotte Ann, my mischievous-minded, usually-hard-to-manage baby sister had been being especially well behaved, not fussing or whining but behaving like most babies don't in the morning.

My grayish-brown-haired mother was sipping her coffee quietly and had a very contented look on her face as we all waited for my bushy-eyebrowed father to finish reading the Bible story he had just started.

As I listened, I didn't have any idea that part of what he was reading was going to get mixed up in the excitement of a wildcat hunt before the summer would pass.

The short Bible story was about a grown-up boy named Jacob, who had had a quarrel with

his brother, Esau. To save his life he left home to go to another country where his mother used to live.

The first night of the long journey was spent in very rocky territory with steep cliffs and outcrops and different-shaped boulders piled on each other. It made me think of the rocky hills above Old Man Paddler's cabin. In fact, the hills in that part of Sugar Creek territory were not far from the haunted house we all knew about, and they were the best place in the world for wildcats to live and hunt and raise their families. Of course, I didn't think of that while Mom was sipping her coffee and Charlotte Ann was playing with her cute, pink, bare toes and Dad was reading along in his deep, gruff voice.

Anyway, while Jacob slept outdoors that night—using a stone for a pillow—he had a dream about a stairway leading all the way up to heaven. In the dream he saw angels going up and down on it.

In a minute Dad would finish reading, and then we'd have what Mom calls a Quaker prayer meeting. That means we'd all be quiet a minute and each one would think his own prayer to God just before Dad or Mom or maybe I would pray with out-loud words, and our day would be started right.

Then is when, all of a sudden, the phone started ringing in our front room.

I listened to see whether it was going to be our ring or somebody else's. I knew all the

gang's numbers by heart: two longs and a short for Little Jim; two shorts and a long for Poetry; three shorts for Circus; two shorts for Big Jim; four shorts for Dragonfly; and ours was one long and one short.

Different other neighbors had different other numbers.

On our phone system, all anybody on our seven-phone line had to do if he wanted to talk to any other family on the line was to go to the phone, lift the receiver, and ring whatever number he wanted.

Of course, everybody on the party line could hear the phone ring in their own house and would know who was being called but not who was calling—unless they lifted their own receiver and did what is called "eavesdropping." Nobody was supposed to do that, but different people sometimes did and made different people mad at each other.

There was also a special ring, which was hardly ever used. It was called an "emergency ring," and nobody was supposed to ring it unless there was an actual emergency, such as an accident or a death in the family or somebody's cow had run away and couldn't be found. That emergency ring was two extra long longs and two very short shorts.

Well, our heads were all bowed at our breakfast table, and in my imagination I was up in the hills not far from the haunted house, lying on a stone pillow and watching angels moving up and down a golden stairway, sort of

like people riding up and down on an escalator in a department store. And that was when I heard the jangling of the telephone. My mind was jarred all the way back to our kitchen table, and I was hearing the extralong ring, followed by another just-as-long long and then two short, sharp shorts.

"Emergency!" Mom, sitting beside Charlotte Ann's high chair, exclaimed, jumping like a scared rabbit that had been shot at and missed. A startled look came over her face, and she was out of her chair in a flurry, accidentally knocking over her chair to get across the kitchen floor as fast as she could, into the living room and to the phone to answer it.

All that excitement brought Charlotte Ann to baby-style life. Her arms flew out and up in several directions. She knocked over her blue mug of white milk, which spilled over the edge of her tray and splashed onto the floor. Mixy, our black-and-white house cat came from her box of straw by the kitchen stove and started lapping up as much of the spilled milk as she could before anybody in the family could mop it up and it'd be wasted.

In the living room Mom's voice gasped, "What! A wildcat! Who said so? How do you know?"

I was out of my chair even faster than Mom had gotten out of hers. I stood beside her at the phone, straining my ears to hear whoever's voice was on the other end of the line, but I couldn't. That is, I couldn't hear any *one* voice.

Instead, because Mom had her receiver about an inch from her ear, I heard a jumble of what sounded like a dozen women's voices. Everybody was talking to everybody, and almost nobody was listening to anybody.

I tell you there was a lot of excitement around our house after Mom hung up and explained what the emergency was. It was Harm Groenwald's fast-talking wife who had rung the emergency number. They'd had three of their prize lambs killed last night. Their carcasses had been torn in the same way that two of their other lambs had been a year ago.

"This time I'm going to find out what killed them!" Harm had told his wife. "I'm going to call Chuck Hammer."

Mrs. Groenwald said the Sugar Creek veterinarian had hurried out from town to have a look at the dead lambs. He used to live out West and had seen kills like that before. He turned the bodies over a few times and said grimly, "We've got either a mountain lion or a monster wildcat on our hands. They both kill the same way. See here?"

He showed Harm what he meant. "They always crush the neck bones in front of the shoulders, then tear into the carcass *behind* the shoulders and eat the heart and liver first."

"But whoever heard of a mountain lion or a wildcat around here?" Harm objected. "They don't live in this part of the country!"

"*One* does," Chuck said, "and he's a big one! Huge!"

They found its tracks in a muddy place, and Chuck said, "Wildcat! I'd say thirty-five pounds, anyway. Maybe forty-five!"

Harm Groenwald's fast-talking, high-pitched-voiced wife told all that to all the people who had answered the emergency ring—told it in less than a minute and a half. It took Mom almost three minutes to tell it to Dad and me.

Dad quick got on the phone then and asked the vet, who was still at Groenwald's house, to stop at our farm on his way back to town. Addie, our red mother hog, had given us a litter of six pigs last night, and Dad thought Chuck ought to look her over and maybe suggest a better diet for her so that her babies would grow stronger fast.

I helped Mom clean up Charlotte Ann's spilled milk and finished just in time to go out to the hog lot where Dad and the veterinarian were talking about the monster of a wildcat and also where Chuck was giving Addie a physical checkup.

"She's all right," he told Dad. "She's given you six of the healthiest pigs I've ever seen. Not a runt in the litter."

Poetry, my best friend, had heard the emergency ring and was on the way to our house to talk it over with me when he'd hitched a ride with Chuck. So he was there, too. That was one reason I didn't quite finish helping Mom clean up the kitchen. I needed to get out where all the excitement was.

Standing by Addie's gate, Poetry started a singsongy little ditty he'd learned somewhere:

"Six little pigs in the straw with their
mother,
Bright eyes, curly tails, tumbling on
each other;
Bring them apples from the orchard
trees,
And hear those piggies say, 'Please,
please, please.'"

I told Poetry it was a cute rhyme, and that started him off in a singsong again.

In fact, right that minute there was a glad singsong feeling in my mind. There had been ever since Harm Groenwald's wife had told Mom and Mom had told Dad and me that it was a wildcat that had killed Harm's two lambs last year as well as this year's three. It had been a wildcat and not a *dog* that had done it!

You know why I was glad if you've read the story *The Bull Fighter*. I never will forget those 10,000 minutes—which is how many minutes it took for a week to pass. Wally, my city cousin, had spent the whole 10,000 minutes at our farm. And Alexander the Coppersmith, his ill-mannered, city-bred dog, had been with him, the most uncontrollable dog there ever was.

Anyway, the night Harm Groenwald's two lambs were killed was the same night Wally's nervous mongrel had unleashed himself. It was my fault that his collar was too loose. *My fault*, I

had thought again and again, *that two innocent lambs had been killed!*

I hadn't told anybody. One reason was that, if they ever proved it was Wally's dog that had done it, then Alexander would have to be shot, and I'd be to blame for *his* death, too. It'd be a shame for a city dog that didn't know any better to have to lose his life.

So I'd put off telling anybody, but I shouldn't have. I should have told what Alexander did before Wally took his dog home to Memory City with him.

But now I'd never have to! Feeling glad in my heart toward God for making everything work out the way it had, and because I was in the habit of talking out loud to Him anytime I felt like it, I all of a sudden said, "Thanks! Thanks a lot!"

Poetry, not knowing what I'd been thinking, answered with his squawky, ducklike voice, "I'm glad you like it. I'll sing it again." And he was off in another half-bass singsong about the six little pigs in the straw with their mother.

We were all interrupted then by the sound of dogs' voices coming from the direction of Harm Groenwald's pasture. I'd heard those same long-voiced hounds before. My mind's eye told me it was Jay and Bawler, Circus Browne's dad's big coonhounds. I was sure they were on the trail of the wildcat. Already Harm Groenwald had called on the best hunter with the best hounds in the whole territory to help him catch the wild beast that had killed his sheep.

Many a time at night I'd heard those dog voices hot on a coon trail along the bayou or the swamp or in the rocky hill country above Old Man Paddler's Lincoln-style cabin.

Jay is a big, long-bodied, hundred-pound bluetick with a deep, hollow bawl. Bawler is a lanky black-and-tan only about half as big as Jay. She has a high-pitched wail that sends chills up and down your spine when she's excited and going strong on a trail.

"Let's go join the hunt!" Poetry exclaimed.

And I answered, "Sure! Let's go."

Dad stopped us, though, by saying, "No, it's an organized hunt. The men have guns, and they won't want any boys along."

It didn't feel good to be stopped, but we weren't the only boys who didn't get to go. Circus, the best athlete and the acrobat of our gang, Dan Browne's only son, didn't get to go, either.

In a few minutes, there he was, coming through the orchard toward us. On a leash, running all around him in a lot of excitement, was his new hound pup he had named "Ichabod," one of the cutest black-and-tans you ever saw.

"The hounds are coming this way," Poetry cried. "Listen! That means Old Stubtail came this direction last night after he killed the lambs. I'll bet he's got his home down in the swamp or maybe along the bayou!"

"Or in the cave," a voice behind us piped up. It was Little Jim, the smallest member of

the gang, who had come without making any noise.

Old Bawler and Jay were *really* coming our way. Already they were in the lane at the south side of our pasture—over the fence, through the pasture and watermelon patch, and straight for the pignut trees at the north end of our garden.

That was enough to scare me. It meant that last night after Old Stubtail, as Circus called him, had had his lamb dinner at Groenwalds', he had come across *our* south pasture, through *our* farmyard, and had been only a hundred yards from *our* henhouse and—

I got my thoughts interrupted then by the hound pup on Circus's leash going simply wild with excitement because Bawler was his mother, and he wanted to get into the excitement, whatever it was.

The pup was at the end of his leash, pulling and tugging and struggling wildly. And then his collar was over his head, and he was off toward the pignut trees to join in whatever kind of dog game his mother and old Jay were playing.

And that's when I heard the pup's hunting voice for the first time. It was a high-pitched, wailing tremolo, like the highest tone on the organ at our church. It was also the longest wail I'd ever heard.

Now there were *three* hounds, and I never saw hunting dogs more excited. They were as excited as if it had been only a few minutes

since the big cat had gone through our orchard. They were over in the orchard now, heading through it toward Poetry's dad's woods and the mouth of the branch beyond and the cave beyond that and Old Man Paddler's hills beyond that.

Mr. Browne let out a yell when little Ichabod joined the chase. He ordered him to stop, but Ichabod wouldn't. It was too much fun. He was also using his own sense of smell to tell him where to trail.

At the orchard fence, though, the pup scared up a rabbit and went off in a different direction, giving chase with an even more excited voice than before.

Bawler and Jay were over the orchard fence and on their way toward the Sugar Creek bridge, and Ichabod was heading toward the place where he'd last seen the rabbit, which was near the beehives in the orchard.

Circus made a dive for his hound when he circled near, grabbed him, and soon had him on leash again. He also gave him a good scolding, saying, "Don't you *ever* do that again! *Never* leave one trail for another. Do you hear?"

Well, it was a long, hard chase for Dan Browne and his hounds. Finally, somewhere in the hills in dry, ragged outcrops above Old Man Paddler's cabin, the dogs lost the scent, and the hunt was over.

Thinking maybe Old Stubtail might come back to finish eating one of the lambs he'd killed, Circus's pop set a number three double-

spring steel trap at a place in the fence where it was easy for a large cat to get through. He tied a feather on a string and hung it on an elderberry bush close to the trap so that the wind would blow it. The cat, belonging to the same family as a house cat, which would be attracted to anything like that, might see the feather, smell the bait near the trap, and get caught.

That night a farmer three miles down the creek lost a calf. The kill was the same kind—a broken neck in front of the shoulders, a hole behind the shoulder, and the heart and liver eaten out.

2

Dan Browne tried the dogs again, and again they lost the trail in the hills above Old Man Paddler's cabin. He tried setting traps in everyplace that looked like good cat cover, but always it was no use. Old Stubtail was too smart to let himself get caught.

Then for a week there were no more kills—not even one—and it began to look as if the big cat had moved to safer territory, maybe clear out of the county.

Two more weeks passed, and still nobody reported any livestock being killed. We all began to breathe more easily. Dan Browne felt sure the cat was gone, especially when Harm Groenwald reported that some wild animal had eaten a batch of special cat poison he'd put out in a likely place. After that, the reports of raiding stopped altogether.

Then the Sugar Creek county fair week came, and most of us got to go for a day. It was always fun to go where there were so many people and so many exhibits to see. Some of the gang won prizes for their lambs or pigs or calves.

It was while we were watching an acrobat doing stunts on a flying trapeze that Little Jim got the idea that *he* wanted to be a trapeze artist. There was almost no living with him for

a while. He'd talk it, sing it, pretend it, and also act out all kinds of dangerous acrobatic stunts when he was with us.

Once, he leaped up, caught hold of the two-by-four at the east end of our grape arbor, swung his feet up and over, and "skinned the cat." Before I could stop him, he'd stood up and actually walked across from one end to the other.

"You're getting reckless," I told him. "You better not ever do that again!"

"Better stick to piano playing," Poetry told him.

As you know, Little Jim was the best boy pianist in the whole Sugar Creek territory. His mother was the organist and pianist in our church.

"My fingers get enough exercise," Little Jim said. "More than enough. I'm going to be an athlete all over."

And we couldn't stop him. He taught himself to do the cartwheel, shinny up trees faster than anything, and chin himself fifteen times. In our haymow he climbed high above the hay and walked across the highest beam, a proud grin on his face. I'd walked that beam myself a few times, and with the hay below it wasn't too dangerous. But it seemed ten times worse for Little Jim to do it.

But Little Jim was good and getting better. The only thing was, we didn't dare tell him *not* to climb up to any dangerous place, or he'd be sure to want to do it.

It was while he was still working hard learning to become a stunt man that we read a story in the *Sugar Creek Times* about sheep killings, lost calves, and even a colt killing in Parke County, almost a hundred miles from where we lived. And that, we decided, explained what had happened to Old Stubtail. He'd left our neighborhood for safer territory.

Because Mr. Browne's hounds were known all over the state and because he'd had better success than most anybody else running down "cats," as he called them, he got a phone call to bring Jay and Bawler and his traps to Parke County. Not only would he get a bounty for killing Old Stubtail, but the farmers would also make up a special purse of one hundred dollars for him.

Circus's pop, as you maybe know, used to be an alcoholic. But he wasn't anymore. He had turned his life over to God to let Him run it, and whiskey and beer and such had gone out.

I never will forget what I once heard him say. He was telling Little Tom Till's unbelieving, drinking father what had happened to him. They were standing at the spring down near the creek at the time. Dan Browne had just handed Old John Till a drink of water, and Old John said, "No thanks, I like this better." And he pulled a flask of whiskey from his hip pocket, lifted it to his lips, and took a swig.

Dan raised his voice and said sternly, "I *used* to do that, but when I let Christ into my life,

alcohol went out for good. I was like old Bawler while I was training her to be a good coonhound. She kept getting after rabbits, possums, skunks—anything except what I wanted her to trail. I finally got her trained except for one thing. She'd always turn aside when she crossed a skunk track. I had to punish her again and again for that.

"Well, God had to punish *me* too—plenty. But He finally won. Now, every time I'm tempted to leave *His* trail for me, to chase off after something He doesn't want, I think of old Bawler and her polecat chasing." Mr. Browne took another sip of water from the spring. "Liquor is the worst skunk of all."

I saw hook-nosed John Till's face turn black with anger. He whirled around, lifted his flask, and drew on it long and hard till it was empty. Then he said, "You can keep your sermons for yourself!" He flung the bottle toward the board fence behind which I was hiding at the time. It hit with a crash, broke into a thousand pieces of fine glass, and scared me half to smithereens.

But I never forgot and never would.

Everybody around Sugar Creek knew what a difference Dan Browne's becoming a Christian had made in his family. People never got over talking about it. Mr. Browne never did either, and sometimes he'd get an invitation to speak in a church or a school assembly or even in the county jail.

His talk would nearly always be called "Trailing Trash."

"Whenever a dog leaves a trail for something the hunter doesn't want, it's called trailing trash," he would tell them. "I've trailed a lot of trash in my day—staying away from church without a good reason I could give to God, using profanity, being unfair to my wife or children, buying booze instead of shoes . . ."

He certainly was well trained now, all right, just as he'd trained his hounds. Old Jay and Bawler were so good and so well trained that sometimes Dan would get a call from another state to bring his dogs and track down something or other that was killing sheep or cattle or too many deer.

Once a wealthy rancher from out West came to Sugar Creek in his private plane. He flew Circus's dad to his ranch to help him catch a mountain lion that was raiding his corral and stealing one lamb after another.

The morning Mr. Browne left for Parke County, he stopped his pickup at our house to ask Mom to be sure to phone his wife several times every day. "We're getting a new baby at our house next month," I heard him say.

I was standing near the mailbox admiring his long-nosed, long-eared, sad-faced hounds, Jay and Bawler, leashed in the back of the pickup. Ichabod was in the front seat with Circus, who was holding onto his collar, trying to calm him down."You going, too?" I asked Circus.

"Just this far," Circus said. "Ichy would get his eyes scratched out and his ears slit to ribbons if he ever got into a fight with Old Stub-

tail. He's got to get experience catching coons first—and they're bad enough."

Pretty soon Circus was out of the pickup, and Ichabod was putting up a noisy fuss to get in the back with his mother and old Jay. But Circus didn't let him. "You can't go!" Circus scolded and held onto his collar. "You stay home with me and be a good boy, and we'll let you catch a baby coon. There's a nest of them down in the old elm above the papaw bushes. Understand?"

Ichabod didn't understand, and he kept on trying to get up where his mother was.

Just before Mr. Browne drove away, I heard Mom say to him, "Bill's expecting a new cousin in Memory City before long, too. I've promised to be there to help celebrate. But it'll be several weeks yet, and you'll be home before that, so I can phone your wife every day you're gone."

But it *wasn't* several weeks. It wasn't even several days. Early the very next morning, the phone rang. It wasn't an emergency ring, but it *was* an emergency. Wally, my city cousin, was going to get his new baby sister or brother that very day, and Mom was supposed to come right away to help celebrate.

In less time almost than it takes me to write it, Mom had Charlotte Ann and herself ready and in the car. Dad was also in, and they were ready to start.

Even though my baby cousin was going to be born that day in Memory City, *I* wasn't going to get to go. I had to stay home to finish the

morning chores, to hoe the potatoes in the little patch that belonged to me, and to do the chores in the evening just in case for some reason Dad didn't get home in time to do them with me.

Old Jersey, our one milk cow, had to be milked twice a day. And the other stock had to be fed, including the six little pigs in the straw with their mother—although they could feed themselves.

From behind the wheel of the car, my dad gave me my final orders. "I'd rather you didn't use your new rifle for target practice while I'm away."

"Yes sir," I said and felt sad and glad at the same time—glad all over that I had a rifle of my own and sad that Dad didn't think I was big enough to know how to use it all by myself.

"Another thing," Dad said above the whirring of the engine, "in case of rain, close all the windows in the house. And as soon as the chickens are all in tonight, be sure to shut the henhouse door."

Mom had a few instructions, too. "Your dinner is on the stove. Just warm it up. And while I'm gone, you and your father wash the dishes at least once a day."

They were off in a whirl of dust, leaving me to myself for what would probably be a whole day. It might even be after dark before Dad could get back.

I watched the car until it disappeared, and I watched the cloud of dust it had raised until

the wind had blown it into nothing in the direction of Bumblebee Hill. Then I went into the house to the phone by the east window and turned the crank, two shorts and a long.

When Poetry's mother answered, I asked for Poetry himself.

She called him in a loud, motherlike voice. While I was waiting for him to come from wherever he was, his mother said to me, "I suppose you want my son to come over and keep you company while you're all alone today?"

"How'd you know?" I asked.

And she answered, "A little bird told me."

I knew she probably meant she'd accidentally had her phone receiver off the hook when Mom was talking to Wally's father long distance.

When Poetry answered, he was very mysterious in his tone of voice. "Listen," he hissed, "I've got a secret. You'd never guess what."

"What?" I asked.

And he answered in his still-mysterious voice, "I'll tell you this afternoon while down at the mouth of the branch, fishing."

"I've got to hoe potatoes," I objected. "I'm not sure I'll let me go fishing."

"Your folks are gone to Memory City, aren't they?"

"Yes, but—"

"All right then. I'll meet you with my secret at two o'clock. At the mouth of the branch."

"Why don't you come over right now?" I asked. "You could help me hoe the potatoes,

and we could get done faster and catch more fish sooner."

His answer didn't have any mystery in its tone of voice. It was "I have a father."

We set the time for two o'clock then, and I started off on the run to finish the morning chores and to get the potato patch cleaned of every weed there was.

Really, it felt good to work, something I was beginning to like to do, for some reason.

Maybe it was because Mom and Dad had been bragging on me a little for being so thoughtful around the house and farm. Or else it was because I'd proved for the past six weeks that I *could* be thoughtful, that I *could* get up in the morning without being called three times, that I *could* actually take my Saturday night bath without being told to four times—such things as that. To reward me, Dad had bought me a beautiful new .22 Savage rifle.

To earn it, he told me, I'd have to prove I could take responsibility. I would have to show him I could act even older than my age. Also I'd had to learn by heart, word for word, "The Ten Commandments of Hunting Safety" and to pass a written examination on it. A *written* examination, mind you, just like a boy takes in school!

But I'd passed with an almost perfect grade, and it had felt so good to actually *be* good that I was sort of keeping on, like a wound-up clock.

I decided to surprise my parents by cleaning up the yard before starting on the potatoes.

Every time I stopped to rest and went into the house for cookies or something, I looked up longingly at my .22. I took it down several times and wished Dad hadn't thought to tell me not to do any target practice while he was away.

Once, just to be sure I had not broken one of the most important rules of hunting safety, I opened the breach to see if I had left it unloaded. I was glad I had, because one of the rules is *never* to leave a loaded gun unattended. I patted its shining walnut stock, stroked its blue steel barrel, and said to it, calling it by the name I'd given it the day Dad bought it for me, "Betty Lizzie, one of these days you're going to come in handy. You'll maybe save my life in an emergency."

When the chores and the hoeing were done, I picked up my bait can, which would have been perfect for setting on a fence post and using for a target, took my long cane fishing pole, and went out the front gate, passing "Theodore Collins" on our mailbox. My bare feet went *plop-plop-ploppety-plop-plop* in the dust of the gravel road on the way to meet my best friend, who said he was bringing a mystery with him.

Since there wasn't any wildcat in the territory for a boy to be scared of, the gang would have to think up something else interesting to talk about and to be a little worried about.

Life's a lot more interesting if there is a mystery around or something exciting or a bit dangerous. For that reason, I hated to think of Old Stubtail's being so far away. A boy ought to have a chance to find out how good a shot he is and whether a bullet from a .22 could really kill a wildcat.

"Ho hum," I yawned as I went lazily along, wondering if maybe I'd catch a fish or two before Poetry came.

I must have eaten too much of the boiled dinner Mom had left for me. I had warmed it up and eaten several large helpings. I certainly felt sleepy. In a few minutes I'd be at the mouth of the branch, where there was a nice grassy place to stretch out and take a nap while the wriggling, twisting angleworms tempted the fish to bite away down in the water on the end of my hook.

It certainly was quiet around Sugar Creek —too quiet for a boy.

Too, *too* quiet. Almost as quiet as it is sometimes just before there is a big thunderstorm. As quiet as a cat sneaking up on a mouse.

How was I to know, as I baited my hook and tossed my line out into the lazy water, that even though nobody around Sugar Creek had reported any killings by Old Stubtail and even though some farmers in Parke County a hundred miles away had lost a few sheep and other livestock—how was I to know that great big twenty-eight toothed, savage-tempered wildcat was still hanging around our territory? How

was I to know that sleepy afternoon was to be the beginning of more excitement than the gang had had in a long time?