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TERRY BISSON

THE COON SUIT

I’M NOT MUCH OF A HUNTER and I don’t care for dogs. I was driving out Taylorsville Road in Oldham County one Sunday, when I saw this bunch of pickups down in a hollow by a pond. My own old yellow and white ’77 Ford half-ton was bought from a coon hunter, and it could have been the truck as much as me that slowed down to take a look. Men were standing around the pickups, most of which had dog boxes in the beds. I saw a Xeroxed sign stapled to a telephone pole, and realized I had been seeing the same sign for a couple of miles along the road.

COON RUN, SUNDAY, CARPENTERS LAKE.

If this was Carpenters Lake, it was not much more than a pond. I could hear dogs barking. I pulled over to watch.

There was a cable running across the water. It ran from a pole where the trucks were parked into the trees on the other side of the pond. Hanging under it, like a cable car, was a wire cage. While I watched, two men took six or eight hounds out of the back of a half-ton Ford and down to the bank. The dogs were going wild and I could see why.

There was a coon in the cage. From where I was parked, up on the road, it was just a little black shape. It looked like a skunk or a big house cat. It was probably just my imagination, but I thought I could see the black eyes, panicky under the white mask, and the hand-like feet plucking at the wire mesh.

A rope ran from the cage, through a pulley on a tree at the far end of the cable and back. A man pulled at the rope and the cage started across the cable, only three or four feet off the water. The men on the bank let the dogs go and they threw themselves in the pond. They were barking louder than ever, swimming under the cage as it was pulled in long slow jerks toward the woods on the other side.

My wife Katie tells me I’m a watcher, and it’s true I’d generally rather watch than do. I wasn’t even tempted to join the men by the pond, even though I probably knew one or two of them from the plant. I had a better view from up on the road. There was something fascinating and terrifying at the same time about the dogs splashing clumsily through the water (they don’t call it dog-paddling for nothing), looking up hungrily at the dark shape in the wire cage.

Once the cage was moving, the coon sat dead-still. He probably figured he had the situation under control. I could almost see the smirk on his face as he looked down at

the dogs in the water, a sort of aviator look.

On the bank the men leaned against their trucks drinking beer and watching. They all wore versions of the same hat, drove versions of the same truck, and looked like versions of the same guy. Not that I think I'm better than them; I'm just not much of a hunter and don't care for dogs. From the boxes in the truck beds, the other hounds waiting their turn set up a howl, a background harmony to the wild barking from the pond.

The situation wasn't fair, though, because whenever the dogs fell behind, the man pulling the rope would stop pulling and let them catch up. While the cage was moving the coon was okay, but as soon as it stopped he would go crazy. He would jump from side to side, trying to get it going again, while the hounds paddled closer and closer. Dogs when they're swimming are all jaws. Then the man would pull on the rope and the cage would take off again toward the trees on the other side, and I could almost see the coon get that smirk on his face again. That aviator look.

The second act of the drama began when the cage reached the tree at the end of the cable. The tree tripped the door and the coon dove out and hit the ground. In a flash he was gone, into the woods that ran up over the hill alongside the road. A few seconds later and the dogs were out of the water after him, the whole pack running like a yellow blur up the bank, shaking themselves as they ran, the water rising off their backs like a cloud of steam. Then they were gone into the trees too.

One of the pickups was already on its way up the road, presumably to follow. The guys in it looked at me kind of funny as they drove by, but I ignored them. Down by the pond the cage was being pulled back, six more dogs were being taken out of the trucks, and a man held a squirming gunnysack at arm's length.

Another coon.

They put him into the cage and I should have left, since I was expected somewhere. But there was something interesting, or I guess fascinating is the word, about the whole business, and I had to see more. I drove a hundred yards up the road and stopped by the edge of the woods.

I got out of the truck.

The brush by the roadside was thick, but after I got into the woods things opened up a little. It was mostly oak, gum, and hickory. I made my way down the slope toward the pond, walking quietly so I could listen. I could tell by the barking when the dogs hit the water. I could tell when the cage stopped, and when it started up again. It was all in the dogs' voices. Through them, I could almost feel the coon's terror when the cage stopped and his foolish arrogance when it started moving again.

Halfway down the hill I stopped in a little clearing at the foot of a big hollow beech. All around me were thick bushes, tangles of fallen limbs, and brush. The barking got louder and wilder and I knew the cage was reaching the cable's end. There was a howl of rage, and I knew the coon was in the woods. I stood perfectly still. Soon I heard a sharp slithering sound and, without a warning, without stirring a leaf, the coon ran out of the bushes and straight at me. I was too startled to move. He ran almost right across my feet—a black and white blur—and was gone up the hill, into the bushes again. For a second I almost felt sorry for the dogs: How could they ever hope to catch such a creature?

Then I heard the dogs again. Pitiless is the word for them. If they had looked all jaws in the water, they sounded all claws and slobber in the woods. Their barking got louder and wilder as they got closer, at least six of them, hot on the coon's trail. Then I heard a crashing in the brush down the hill. Then I saw the bushes shaking, like a storm coming up low to the ground. Then I heard the rattle of claws on dry leaves, getting closer and closer. Then I saw a yellow blur as the dogs bolted from the bushes and across the clearing straight at me. I stepped back in horror.

That's when I realized, or I guess remembered is the word, that I had my coon suit on.