

NANCY BARTZ

Pursuit

Night sounds very often blend with dreams, altering them so that you cannot determine in your conscious hours which were causes and which were effects. In the heart of the night, from some distant place, a special sound was reaching me, disturbing whatever dream-vision was in progress.

A wild chase, beginning to the west and involving two unknown beings, passed directly beneath the bedroom window of my creek-bank home and woke me from sound sleep with a sudden chill. The victim's frightened shrieks pierced the pre-dawn night. Snorting and snarling, the hunter pursued with great and relentless speed, its feet pounding the ground. The pair circled the yard, then tore down the steep creek sides, snapping twigs and scattering dry leaves.

I leaped from bed to the closest window as I heard them hit the shallow water bottom and continue up the opposite side. All the time the plaintive, staccato screams of the prey penetrated my head, and my body involuntarily tensed in response.

Through the yards, on the other side, they raced, waking the big dog chained there, who added his mournful howl to the strange voices.

They doubled back, bringing the sounds my way again. When they reached the water once more, the whine increased with savage force and desperation, and I knew, without seeing, that the battle was almost over.

The end came beneath the overhanging branches of the trees which, in daylight, form a lush, green, peaceful refuge for many wild things. The violent noise of churning water suggested the image of sharp teeth sinking deeper in the creature's neck, shaking and crushing its life away.

The smaller animal persistently cried in its struggle, at first loudly and rapidly, then more slowly, and agonizingly. I was impatient for it to be over, for I suddenly felt tired and helpless. I didn't want to hear any more. Please, let it be done soon.

For a few minutes there was silence. Then I could hear the victor wading through the water and entering the foliage, dragging the lifeless body along, and resting periodically.

I was consumed with morbid curiosity to see the triumphant winner. I felt sure the victim was a rabbit, for I had once heard the same futile sounds from a baby rabbit dragged off into the bushes by a family of cats. But no animal that roams my yard had ever presented the image of being such a tireless, vicious hunter as was there tonight.

It was no dog, of that I was sure, for its barking would have betrayed it. No raccoon, opossum, or groundhog would be interested, if, indeed, one could have traveled that fast. And no cat could ever make that pounding sound I heard.

The moonlight that bathed the yard as I waited assured me that if the predator retraced its path through the hedge border I could identify it. But it didn't appear and I felt the chill of the night in my bones and retreated to my bed, my ears alert to the night noises.

I was alone this night, and never since we have lived in this house have I experienced fear. But here, in the very center of this small town, with a creek running beside the lot, and trees entwined with wild grape vines, I had witnessed, indirectly, the life-and-death struggle of nature.

It was a long time before I relaxed. I imagined the victory feast that must be taking place so near, and I didn't like it. My mind drifted in free association.

"Oh, God," I prayed, "I know it is natural for such a contest to be, but may I never have to experience the feeling of the hot breath of an enemy fast at my back."

No film or television special of the hunter and the hunted ever produced such realistic sound effects to prepare me for the agony of it all. Orchestral backgrounds neatly censor this realism from a picture. I know that in the past as well as the present, in war and in peace, man and animals have always grappled with each other and with their own kind. But that realization did not lessen the horror of this encounter for me.

My thoughts sped on. There are two things I must do tomorrow morning before anything else can be started. I must write down what I feel this night. It is important that I remember it. Then I must go to the dense banks to see what can be seen, if anything.

I know after that I will be able to go on with the ordered events of my own life. I will chase the groundhog from my lettuce bed, and the mother raccoon from my garbage pails in the garage. I will continue to delight in the brilliant cardinals as they feed in my neighbor's yard. I will care, as best I can, for my family returning today.

But, from this time on, any animal which wanders freely through my domain will make me wonder whether this is the one, who, at night, changes into a Mr. Hyde, and torments those that are smaller.

I was glad I had been alone this night, for my gentle children would have been distressed and sent me, with flashlight in hand, to give aid. It was not to be that way, however.

The living go on and on. What is done is done, and I must pursue that morrow, and put aside the drama of the evening, for I was merely an intruder on a private and important scene.

Soon the birds were awakening, chattering happily, and the squirrels' feet clattered and clicked on the loose bark of the dead tree outside my window. The sounds were a lullaby and somehow reassured me that many have survived the night hunters of their life, as I have survived these many years. And then I could return to my sleep for a time, until the sun rose to dispel the wildness of the night.
