

THE CREATURE IN THE DOORWAY

By Jackie Vivelo

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THE TAIL was the part of the creature Jeff Pardee saw first, though he didn't know then that it was a tail. In his seat by the window, Jeff was the width of the room away from the classroom door, but he could see the doorway perfectly well. And he could see the black velvet rope that lay just inside the door. As he watched, it rose in a lazy, looping motion and thrashed down against the floor. No, not a rope, something living.

He had mistaken it for a rope, but not for a moment could it be mistaken for a snake. No snake could rise so completely or fall with that graceful power. What he was seeing was a cat's tail, only twenty times bigger than the tail of any housecat. Staring hard at the shadows in the partially opened door, Jeff thought he could see the curve of a dark haunch. He watched, mesmerized by the motions—the flicks and lashes of the tail—until biology class was almost over. A shuffling of paper around him drew his attention to the other students. None of them seemed to have noticed the creature in the doorway. When their books were stacked, a few of those most eager to be out of class glanced toward the hall, but nobody screamed or pointed or even commented.

Jeff kept quiet too.

In English and geometry classes, the teachers kept the doors closed, so Jeff had no chance to watch the hallway for another glimpse of the dark creature. By noon he began to think he had been dreaming in biology. But during the first class after lunch, the creature came back.

Miss Sorrel always left the door ajar in the French room—“*pour le vent de travers*, or to get a crosscurrent,” she would explain.

In this class Jeff sat closer to the door and he saw the big black creature come and first drop to its haunches and then stretch out just outside the door with its tail trailing into the French room.

A *panther*, Jeff thought. What other cat could be so large? A *black panther*. He watched it with hungry interest through the rest of the class period.

On the following day Jeff kept an eye on the door all through biology class, but the panther did not come. Between classes he tried to look up and down the halls, but the crowds of students moving between classrooms and lockers blocked his view. By the time he reached his own locker and switched books, he was almost late for class. At the door of the geometry room, he paused as the bell rang. Glancing once more up and then down the hall, he spied the panther walking away from him. The animal seemed to sense Jeff's gaze. The huge cat's head swung slowly around on its well-muscled neck. The panther's eyes did not meet Jeff's, but the great creature held his head in profile as though acknowledging an admirer.

In study hall that afternoon, Jeff picked up volume P of the encyclopedia.

"Whatcha lookin' up?" asked Richard, who shared a table with him.

"Nothin'." Jeff shrugged. And he soon found out he had spoken more truly than he had intended.

"Panther," he read, "is a name given to the leopard." He took the volume back and exchanged it for the L volume.

Sliding back into his chair and flipping the pages he found the entry for "Leopard." *Ah, this is more like it*, he thought.

"Leopards are the third largest cats in the world. Only lions and tigers are larger."

Jeff stopped and thought. The only time he had seen the full length of the leopard had been in the hallway, and then he had seen him from behind so it was hard to judge size. Still, this black panther seemed bigger than anything he had ever seen in a zoo—lion, tiger, or whatever.

"An average leopard is two feet high at the shoulder and seven-and-a-half feet long," he read. "The largest may be nine feet long. A male may weigh 100 to 160 pounds, the female 75 pounds. The black leopard is so dark the spots are almost impossible to see; the whole animal looks black.

"Leopards are climbers and spend part of each day in trees. They are meat-eaters, though they rarely attack humans. Incredibly strong, leopards have been known to drag 150-pound carcasses to branches twenty feet above the ground."

Jeff silently formed the word "wow" and closed the book.

At home that evening he looked up “Leopard” in a big book called *Animals of the World*. The illustration showed a leopard pouncing on a deer. “Leopards hunt monkeys, sheep, jackals, goats, and antelopes,” Jeff read. This book too said that leopards don’t usually attack people.

“But once an individual leopard discovers people are easy prey, he becomes more dangerous than a tiger.”

Prey? Jeff pondered, as he closed the book. *I wonder if I’m prey to my leopard. Is he stalking me?*

Jeff wasn’t prepared for biology class, but he wasn’t worried. The odds of being called on in a class of thirty-eight people were very small. In fact, he imagined he could slip almost unnoticed right through his high school years if he really tried. He sat in class wishing he could draw cartoons as Richard did to pass the time. Then, ten minutes before the bell, Mr. Berrens walked over and opened the door.

The panther must have been leaning against it because he sprawled into the room as the door moved back. With his hand on the door and his eyes still on his book, Mr. Berrens stepped away.

Jeff held his breath, afraid to move, frightened that everyone around him would see the panther. No one did. Class went on just as before.

That afternoon Jeff was watching the panther through the open door of the French room. The class was translating a story about a girl who came home to find her friends making a mess of her room, playing her records, and even disturbing her goldfish.

“*Qui a insulte mon poisson rouge?* Who insulted my goldfish?” someone translated.

Jeff tried to focus his attention on the French book, but soon his eyes wandered to the shadowy form in the doorway. Miss Sorrel wouldn’t like it; she’d drive it away. Jeff wondered how you tell someone in French that she had insulted your panther.

“Richard!” Miss Sorrel said sharply in the tone of a teacher calling a name the second time. Jeff turned to look at Richard, whose mind had clearly not been on French class. Perhaps Richard had also seen the panther. Jeff regarded him with interest.

“What was the question, Miss Sorrel?”

“Didn’t you hear the question, Richard?”

“I’m sorry, Miss Sorrel. I was drawing a cartoon of insulting a goldfish.”

The class laughed and Jeff turned away, feeling oddly relieved. Richard’s distraction had had nothing to do with the panther. Jeff was beginning to think of the panther as his own.

He wasn’t curious about why only he could see the leopard; he was just grateful. Whatever the leopard’s business with him, it was private, just between the two of them.

For more than a week, Jeff watched the panther. Long classes, boring classes flew by unnoticed. His only thought was for the sight of the sleek black fur. Through open doors of classrooms he watched the creature. Sometimes in the halls between throngs of blue-jeaned legs, he would see the easy slouch of its movement.

He felt certain the panther was aware of him, but it never looked directly at him. *I’m always watching him, but if he sees me at all I don’t know it.*

One day as Jeff stared at the flip-flop of the leopard’s tail, Miss Sorrel called on him to translate the French lesson. Jeff looked at the open page in front of him. He knew he had the right page, but what had just been read? He searched frantically for his place and looked up bewildered. A movement at the door caught his eye and he saw the great cat stretch languidly, extending one leg with its huge hind paw into the classroom.

Heartened by the sight, Jeff looked again at the page and started to read: “*La forêt est verte et sombre. Ici le léopard babite.* The forest is green and dark. Here the leopard lives.”

“*Trés bien.* Very good, Jeff.” Miss Sorrel praised him.

Jeff sighed, followed the translation for the rest of the page, and only then looked up to find his panther had gone.

“Major move in French class! You’ve got Miss Sorrel fooled,” Richard told him in study hall. “How about playing some racketball after school?”

Jeff shook his head. “Maybe tomorrow.”

Often after school, he lingered in the halls hoping for a last sight of his panther.

It’s as much a case of my stalking him as of his stalking me, Jeff told himself on the way home. “Friend or foe?” he chanted to himself, climbing the stairs to his room. “Friend or foe? That’s what I would like to know.”

Laughing at himself, he threw his book bag onto the bed and raised the shade of his window.

He almost stumbled backward. The usually bare limbs of the tree by the window weren't bare any longer. Stretched full length, arrogant and imperturbable, the leopard lay on a branch just beyond the glass.

As Jeff stared open-mouthed, the bold head lifted and the great yellow eyes looked straight into his. He heard his mother calling. Held by the gaze, he stayed where he was. Looking into the creature's eyes for the first time, he felt certain that he was chosen rather than chased. The yellow eyes slowly closed and opened, and Jeff was released from their spell. His question answered, he mouthed "thanks" toward the beast and hurried to find his mother.

Deep in the night, groggy with sleep and dreams, Jeff was disturbed by a rattling at his window. He turned one ear into the pillow and tried to ignore the noise, but it just grew more insistent. Finally he got out of his tousled bed and made his way to the window. Gripping the ledge, he studied the tree by the light of the moon. The huge cat was back, and on a branch opposite him was a second, slightly smaller cat, just as dark and imposing as Jeff's cat.

"What?" Jeff asked, befuddled by the sight. "What is it you want?"

The branch on which the larger cat lay rocked and tapped at the window again.

Hastily Jeff opened the window, wrestled with the screen for a moment, and then pulled it free.

"Come in," he invited, stepping aside. He eased himself back into the shadows and waited.

For a long time nothing happened. Then he saw the forepaws of the smaller cat land on the windowsill, while the hindlegs still rested on the tree. After another long wait, she slid through the window. (This one, Jeff decided, had to be "she," the mate of his panther.) Moments passed and Jeff held his breath as long as he could. At length the cat chose to settle herself under Jeff's bed. Still Jeff waited.

When it became obvious that the male would not follow her into the room, Jeff replaced the screen and exchanged another long look with the huge creature outside before closing the window.

Before morning, the panther under Jeff's bed gave birth to four cubs. Jeff moved most of his bedding onto the floor to provide a nest for the mother and her young.

Leaving for school the next day, he posted his DO NOT DISTURB sign on the door of his room—not that his mother ever entered anyway.

“It smells,” she would say, “and the whole mess is so depressing.”

If his mother wanted to complain this morning, Jeff had to admit that she would have a reason.

It does smell odd, he thought. But he'd have to disagree about the depressing part. His room had never been more interesting or more exciting.

From the corner of his eye he watched the black panther all day at school. In the evening, sitting at a respectful distance, he watched the mother and her cubs. When the male climbed the tree with the carcass of his prey, Jeff opened the window so that the two leopards could share their meal.

After a few days Jeff fell into the habit of sitting up late watching the cubs and then stretching out to sleep on the floor in front of his door.

After two months of sharing his bedroom with the cats, Jeff came home one day to find them gone. He searched the house first, then his yard, and finally he climbed the tree. Nothing. Not a sign of the panthers anywhere.

Too depressed to clean his room or reclaim his bed, he once again slept on the floor.

“You look like something the cat dragged in,” his mother told him at breakfast the next morning. “Comb your hair and pull yourself together.”

All day he watched for the panther at school but didn't catch sight of him. At night he tried to ignore the emptiness of his room. By the end of the week, he decided the panther and his family were gone for good.

In the following week Jeff had to write an essay about the poem “Tyger, Tyger,” for English class. He read that William Blake was a poet who had the “courage to risk obscurity.” Jeff didn't think that took courage; all poems were pretty obscure. And besides, “Tyger, Tyger” seemed clearer to him than most poems.

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

Like the poet, Jeff had spent time wondering about the origin of a big, deadly cat. He wrote about Blake's poem, thought about his panther, and earned a B+ on his essay.

From his biology textbook, he learned that the leopard's scientific name is *felis pardus*. Even his schoolwork seemed designed to keep his mind on his panthers.

More out of habit than hope, he continued to look for his cats. Once he thought he saw the big male turning a corner in the hall but concluded he had just seen a shadow when he chased it and found nothing.

One Friday afternoon riding home on the bus, he was staring dully out the window when he became aware of a blacker area of the bus's shadow. Instantly after, he sat up, peered down beside the bus and saw the panther, sleek and long-legged, moving fluidly beside them, keeping pace with the bus.

Concentrating all his attention on the big cat, Jeff kept him in sight until the bus stopped at his own corner. He climbed off, still keeping an eye on the panther. The huge creature halted in the shadow until the bus pulled away and then he moved with big-footed grace onto the path beside Jeff.

Just at the point where Jeff would have left the walkway to go into his house, the leopard turned aside in the opposite direction. Afraid to let it out of his sight, Jeff followed. At first at a casual walk and then, matching strides, speeding up to an easy run, the two moved into the trees, past a tumbled-down barbed-wire fence, to the edge of a creek.

The panther stopped and looked directly at Jeff. Ahead of them the mother and cubs were dark spots amid splashes of sun through the trees. Cautiously, Jeff edged toward them, leaving his book bag behind under a tree.

One—two—three. One cub was missing. Now both adults were staring at him.

"Where's the other one?" he asked softly and began to look around.

Angry kitten sounds drew him to a patch of bramble. The cub was clearly visible under a tent of prickly vines.

Why doesn't he crawl out? Jeff wondered.

The cat looked trapped but the thorns alone shouldn't have been enough to stop him. Jeff studied the situation, the parents watching as he tried to understand the cub's plight.

Growling and meowing, the cub roamed about his enclosure. A sudden movement tumbled him over, and then Jeff saw the problem: one paw was caught fast, tangled in a strand of wire.

Pushing his hands gingerly through the brambles, Jeff reached the cub. He rubbed its head, scratched its ears to reassure it, and then felt along the hind leg until he touched the wire. The wire couldn't be broken. He'd have to untwist it. Taking the small cat in one hand and maneuvering through the briars, he grasped the wire with the fingers of his right hand.

Trickles of blood were running down his arms where he had torn them on the thorns. Manipulating the wire, he tried to free the cat. Once it cried out in pain, and Jeff quickly reversed the direction he was turning the wire. After a while, he slid the cub and his own bloodied hands out of the thorny enclosure.

Pushing past Jeff, the mother claimed her fourth cub and began washing it, the force of her tongue rolling it over on the leaves.

For long moments Jeff watched, tolerantly ignored by the cats. Then, regretfully, he gathered up his book bag and left the cat family to its woodland privacy.

On Saturday morning, Jeff lay in bed wondering what had awakened him at five o'clock. He rolled on his side and stared at a corner of his rug, frayed by the cats' chewing. Just as he began to debate the possibility of seeking them out again, he heard the familiar scratching at the window.

He sprang out of bed in a single motion, threw open the window, and thrust aside the screen. They were back—the male, the female, and all four cubs. The mother and the cubs came through the window first. And this time, the big male followed them in.

Of course there won't be room for me any more, Jeff decided as they settled themselves around his room. *But who needs a bedroom?* He laughed out loud.

To most of the leopard family, he soon became no more than a shadowy form that occasionally appeared in their doorway, watching as they pursued their cat lives in the lair of his bedroom.

Before long, however, one small cub with a bandaged hind paw, began to follow Jeff out of the room, to lie curling around his feet at the supper table, chewing at his shoes, and purring when Jeff slipped him table scraps.