

A Puddy Tat?
by Lee Netzler

It was almost midnight on a warm windless Colorado evening. Rusty and I stepped out the patio door into our back yard for our last outing of the day. It is our nightly routine, and I make it a point to go out with him just to make sure he doesn't get into any trouble.

Even though we live in a populated urban area half a mile inside the city limit, and our back yard is enclosed with a six feet tall cedar privacy fence, I know from experience that danger may still find a way in. One evening, for example, we stepped out onto the patio and startled a raccoon that was prowling there. With Rusty in close pursuit, it raced to the tree at the edge of the patio and scrambled out of reach to save itself. Rusty thought he was the dominant critter in this encounter, but I know that tangling with a 40-pound cornered raccoon would likely end in disaster for a 22-pound Scottie.

Another time Rusty flushed a large tom cat lurking in the dark end of the yard. It was nimble enough to easily elude him and scale the fence to safety, but if the cat had been unable to escape, a clash between the two could certainly have brought serious harm to Rusty.

So, as a safety precaution, I accompany Rusty out into the yard for his last prowl of the evening. It is usually uneventful, but the thought of encountering something wild and dangerous such as another raccoon, or a porcupine, or perhaps some rabid animal is enough to motivate me to go out with him.

As I mentioned, it was almost midnight as Rusty and I stepped out into the light on the patio. I remained on the patio as he moved ahead and began his final strut through the grass and along the fence around the back yard. The air was perfectly still and it was very quiet. Rusty moved slowly along, sniffing here and there, his concentration occupied by the scents that conveniently fell beneath his nose.

Suddenly there was a strange noise caused by something moving in the neighbor's yard behind us. Our privacy fence effectively blocked any view into the dark, but there was no doubt that we both had heard something there.

Rusty turned and weather-vaned toward the disturbance. The hair on his withers bristled and his posture stiffened as he pointed to the potential threat. He gave a long low growl of warning to the mysterious presence hidden from our sight. A few seconds passed as we both strained to hear anything further. Then I distinctly heard the deep guttural throat-clearing growl of a big cat. It was the kind of voice we have all heard in movies and nature programs featuring lions and tigers and other big meat-eating predators. The throaty utterance was unmistakable.

I was speechless. Hearing that sound in our own back yard at the stroke of midnight was simply not logical. Rusty's behavior was just as illogical and unexpected. He turned and raced through the open patio door back into the house. He, the Fearless One, who daily

patrolled his yard, without ever a moment of fear or hesitation, heard one cat-like growl and immediately dashed to safety.

I was confused. I stood perfectly still and listened to the silence of the night, hoping to detect something to give another clue about what was out there. But hearing nothing more, I conceded that it was just too strange for me to understand. After standing motionless and listening for a little while longer, I gave up and went back into the house.

Puzzled, I recounted the incident to Joanie, but she had no explanation for it either. Finally I put it out of my mind as one of the unsolvable mysteries of life and went to bed. By the next morning, it was forgotten.

That is, it was forgotten until our morning newspaper arrived on Thursday. The large headline proclaimed "LION'S SNARE." The secondary headline added "Rescuers Save Treed Female Mountain Lion." Three pictures were splashed around the text, showing a mountain lion in a tree, a photo of four firemen carrying a limp mountain lion on a folded tarp, and a crowd of onlookers examining the occupant of a large cage. The news story explained that on Wednesday morning a mountain lion was discovered in a tree deep in a residential area two miles east of our house. The resident, whose barking dog alerted her to the lion, called for help. State wildlife experts and city fire department personnel responded.

Soon a plan to capture and relocate the lion was undertaken. The Department of Wildlife District Manager shot the lion with a tranquilizer dart. Ten minutes later, the groggy cat fell safely into a tarp held aloft by firefighters positioned below the tree. They carried the comatose lion to a waiting cage where it soon recovered. Later, it was taken away to be released back into the wild at an undisclosed location.

Now, when I think of what happened in our back yard at midnight on Monday, it makes sense. We never did see any lion, but the evidence is sufficient to convince me it was right behind our fence.

Sometimes I question whether I am unnecessarily protective of my Scottie. The answer I always arrive at is that I am responsible for the safety of my dearest friend who has the reasoning capacity of a very young child. A short walk in the yard with him every evening is no inconvenience in return for the pleasure of his company.