

LIFE-THREATENING ENCOUNTERS

In 1920, when my mother was twelve, she was confronted by a cougar on her way to collect eggs from the family's hen house. She was terrified but knew not to run because the cougar would chase her down like a cat after a mouse. She grabbed a limb, raised it over her head in a threatening manner, and charged the cougar while yelling and screaming. The bewildered cougar ran back into the forest.

Like my mother, I have survived a number of potentially life-threatening encounters. Following are five recollections. (Green Eyes can also be found in Early Memories.)



Green Eyes

In November 1947, a month after Mom gave birth to my sister Nancy, we moved to Oregon. Bill, my-stepfather, had accepted a foreman's job in Sutherlin, a sawmill town I couldn't find on the map. Sutherlin was where I met Green Eyes and, more than a half century later, I'm still haunted by his angry eyes looking at me through the window.



We left for Sutherlin over Thanksgiving weekend in Bill's gray Buick; with a hood ornament that looked like a prehistoric bird. I rode in back with Bill's floppy-eared Cocker Spaniel, Crumpet. I was squashed against the baby cradle that was stuffed with everything that wouldn't fit into the car trunk.

To entertain myself, I followed our progress on the map, anticipating when we would reach Seattle, Tacoma, Olympia, Portland, Albany, Salem, and Roseburg. Ten hours later, I was asleep.

"Jimmy," Bill said, reaching back and shaking me, "look, you can see the mill's burner."

"Huh?" I blurted, rising up and banging my head on the ceiling, and dumping Crumpet onto the floor.

"We'll be home in another ten minutes," he said.

While I was wondering how Bill could call Sutherlin home, I saw the mill's burner. Thousands of golden-orange sparks were shooting out of what looked like a giant tepee, lighting up the sky like an erupting volcano.

Sutherlin, in the eastern foothills of Oregon's coastal mountains, was bisected by Highway 99. Bill slowed from fifty miles-per-hour to twenty-five as we entered the town. We passed a gas station with a repair garage, a church, a bank, a café, a tavern, a country store that Bill said sold food and just about everything offered in a Sears catalog. Houses were interspersed between the businesses. It was so long ago that I can't remember the names of the businesses. Bill pointed down a side street and said that was where I would

be going to school. The Rock Island Lumber Company sawmill was on the east side of the highway at the end of town.

Our house and the manager's house, both owned by the company, were across the street from the mill, next to the woods and away from the ear-piercing racket of a saw knifing through logs. Our houses were separated by a row of leafless oak trees and a lawn strewn with shriveled dandelions. At one time, the houses had been painted green with white trim, but soot from the mill's burner had turned them gray.

The houses were no bigger than double-wide trailers. The room in front faced the mill across the road and was our living-and-dining area. The house was furnished, but Mom said everything looked like it was purchased at a garage sale. A yellow, threadbare davenport and matching cushioned chairs were backed against the front window that faced the mill manager's house. On the other side of the front door was a cedar-plank table with six chairs with missing or broken spindles.

Two bedrooms in back looked out upon a forest and the mountain foothills; they were separated by a bathroom and a closet that opened onto a hallway to the kitchen. In Everett, I'd had my own bedroom and bath. Here I had to share a bedroom with my baby sister and the bathroom with my parents.

We spent Sunday unpacking and I mowed the lawn. Monday morning, Mom registered me for school. When I entered the fifth-grade class, which shared the room and teacher with the sixth grade, everyone stared at me. I was short for ten and hadn't lost my baby fat. My friends told me I looked like a monk, because Mom had trimmed my thick, straight black hair using a bowl. But, it wasn't my features that my classmates were staring at; it was my clothes. I was wearing a light-brown sweater Mom had knit, over a blue shirt, with brown corduroy pants and maroon penny loafers. The boys were all sons of loggers and mill workers. They wore heavy, green denim shirts, Levis or overalls with straps, and high-top, lace-up boots. A few days later, I was dressed like all the others.

I first saw Green Eyes — I never knew his name — during Christmas vacation.

Bill had given me a job hauling scrap wood to the burner. Green Eyes wore a faded denim shirt, tattered, mud-caked overalls with straps that fastened over his shoulders, and an old bill cap whose company's insignia was no longer recognizable. His skin was ink black, and his stubby bearded face appeared to have been chiseled from granite. With his gloveless, massive calloused hands that looked like they could crush rock, he pulled eight-inch posts off a conveyor like they were broomsticks.

All work stopped when the noon whistle blew. I went home, because Mom only let me work half a day. The mill workers went to a heated enclosure to eat. But Green Eyes never appeared to have brought a lunch. He always went alone to the burner and sat against the warm sheet metal.

At the end of vacation, back in school, Green Eyes quickly faded from my memory.

On a Friday night near the end of winter, my parents and the mill manager and his wife went to Roseburg for dinner, leaving me to care for my baby sister. As soon as they left, I bolted the front door and grabbed Gulliver's Travels — we didn't have television — and joined Crumpet on the davenport. Nancy was fast asleep in her cradle. I hadn't read more than a few pages when the hinge on the front screen door squeaked. I looked up, wondering why my parents had returned so soon.

It wasn't them. It was Green Eyes. He was inside the screen and his head was pressed against the glass top half of the front door. He was looking at me. He had to know we kids were alone, because the carport was empty. He'd probably watched my parents leave, I figured.

His piercing green eyes sent shivers down my spine as he looked back and forth between me and the baby cradle. Mom had told me the terrible things bad men did to children. When he pushed his shoulder against the door, my heart beat in the back of my throat. The handle clicked, but the deadbolt held. Green Eyes took one last look, and leapt off the porch. I watched him through the living-room window as he ran to the corner of the house.

Then I remembered I hadn't bolted the back door! I jumped up and grabbed the baby. I had to get out the front door and into the woods before Green Eyes got inside! Nancy began bawling when I jerked her awake. I knew that there was no chance for us to hide now.

Think! Think! I screamed to myself.

Then I remembered the shotgun in the closet. Bill had let me shoot it when he hunted quail in the hills behind our house. I put my baby sister back into the cradle and raced to the closet.



Jim learning to shoot.

In my panic, I knocked the cartridge box off the shelf. It shattered onto the floor and the shells flew in every direction. On my knees, I grabbed a shell and jammed it into the gun's chamber.

A breeze from the hallway brought the pungent odor of sulfur. Oh, God! He's in the kitchen!

Crumpet started barking and Green Eyes came into the hall.

I slammed the gun bolt closed, disengaged the safety, and raised the widely swinging 20-gauge to my shoulder. Green Eyes heard the safety click and stopped two paces away. His hands flew up, his defiant expression changed to terror, and he began to back up.

I got to my feet and followed him, staying well out of his reach. He crossed the kitchen, bumped against the screen door, flung it open, then bolted off the porch. I watched him crash through the fir branches into the woods.

I slammed the door behind him, but I was shaking and I couldn't turn the bolt until I put the gun down and used both of my hands.

I returned to the front room. Nancy had stopped crying. When I looked into the cradle, she smiled at me and I thought about what Green Eyes would have done to us.

I shut off the lights so Green Eyes wouldn't be able to see into the room and, clutching the shotgun, I sat against the wall in one of the spindle-back chairs. The mill's burner lit up the night like a full moon, giving me good visibility of both the front and side yards.

It seemed like hours before I saw Bill's car lights. I started crying before the door opened.

"Jimmy, what's wrong?" Mom screamed as she came through the front door and saw me holding the shotgun.

"The black man," I tried to say, but I was bawling.

"What happened?"

"Hold on, son," said Bill as he followed Mom to the cradle. "You're safe now."

"The black man from the mill tried to get us," I blabbered.

"Slow down," Bill said.

"I forgot to lock the back door," I continued, still crying. "But I got the gun loaded before he could grab me."

"You did some quick thinking," Bill said, and he gently pulled the gun from my arms.

"I had to fire him yesterday. I caught him drinking whisky. He picked up his check and left the mill, muttering he would get even. I never imagined he would try to hurt you and Nancy."

Bill called the sheriff. Mom and I sat in complete silence, each in our own thoughts. Tears streamed down her cheeks and bounced off Nancy's head. I couldn't stop wondering what would have happened if Green Eyes had come to the back door first.

A few days later, the sheriff stopped by to tell us that an arrest warrant was out for Green Eyes, but he had disappeared.

Not in my dreams has he disappeared, I thought.

Gang Confrontation

It was a Friday evening after midterm exams at Stanford University during the spring of my junior year. Phil and I picked up our dates at Story House to attend a beach outing. The temperature was in the seventies and the fragrance of spring blossoms was intoxicating.

When we reached Half Moon Bay, the stars were just appearing in a cloudless sky. We parked on the cliff above the beach, in sight of the bonfire where our fraternity brothers were gathering below.

Carrying a picnic basket, beer, and a blanket, we threaded our way through hillside brush down the steep trail. On a plateau before the final descent, two Hispanics dressed in black jeans, black vests, and black motorcycle boots stepped out of the bushes in front of us.

"Give me your beer," the larger of the two said. He was over six-feet tall, had long, unkempt, stringy hair, and wore a Fu Man Chu mustache.

"It's not for—" Before I could say "sale," he grabbed the twelve-pack from my hands.



Without hesitating, I dove onto him, toppling him over—a foolish thing to do, even with Phil there, a lineman on the Stanford football team.

The twelve-pack hit the ground, broke open, and beer cans cart-wheeled down the path. As I straddled the guy, I felt, then saw, the blade of his knife pressed against my abdomen.

Shouts rang out, possibly saving my life. My assailant turned to see who was approaching, and I leapt off of him. He recognized his friends and slashed out at me with his knife, but missed. The four of us stood together afraid to make a run for it and watched them gather up the beer. When they finished, they encircled us.

Phil and I stood back to back, with our dates between us. I prepared for a beating. I later learned that the girls feared they would be raped.

After shouting a string of obscenities at us, the Hispanics turned and walked away, taking our picnic basket and blanket, along with the beer.

We sprinted down the hill to the beach, not stopping until we reached the bonfire, and told our friends what happened. Many of them had also been robbed, but none had tried to resist.

Our group was without food and beverages, so we all left and resurrected our party at Rosottis, Stanford's favorite local bar. Huddled together, Phil and I and our dates relived our terrifying encounter.

A few weeks later, a picture of our assailant appeared in the San Francisco Chronicle under the heading: "Stanford Student Killed by Palo Alto Butcher's Assistant." According to the story, Stanford students at a Half Moon Bay beach party had been confronted by a Hispanic gang. During the altercation, a student had been struck across the forehead with a two-by-four and died without regaining consciousness. I realized how easily that could have been me.

Carjacking

It was an overcast winter afternoon in 1975. I was thirty-eight. As I braked my Lincoln for a yellow light, I noticed a tall, gaunt, young man propped against a corner telephone pole. He wore Levis, a rain-soaked, gray-hooded sweatshirt, and black high-top tennis shoes. His head bobbed, like he was keeping time to music. I couldn't see earphones, so I suspected he was high on drugs.

I have always had a sixth sense about situations not being quite right, and this scene didn't make sense. If he was waiting for the bus, he should have been inside the bus stop enclosure out of the rain. If he intended to cross the street, he should have been standing at the curb.

Then it struck me. He was waiting for someone like me, one car at the intersection, stopped in the right-hand lane on his side of the street.

Taking no chance, I flipped the switch that locked all my doors.

When my Lincoln came to a stop, the fellow pushed away from the telephone pole and hopped off the curb. Simultaneously he pulled a snub-nosed .38 revolver from his sweatshirt pocket with his right hand and grabbed my passenger-side door handle with his left hand.



When it wouldn't open, he wagged his pistol, motioning me to release the lock. Instinctively, I knew better than to be forced to drive to a remote area, where I would be robbed and possibly killed.

I dropped my head and body to the passenger seat below the angle of the gun, and jammed the accelerator to the floor.

The window did not explode. He was smart enough not to shoot, as other cars were approaching the intersection.

In one last act of defiance, he slammed the pistol against the roof of my car, which left a substantial dent (my sons couldn't wait to show it to their friends). Then he darted down the sidewalk into an alley.

There was no point in following him, as cell phones were not yet available.

Robbery and Attempted Murder

I pulled up out front of my two-story, brick-veneer office building as the sun peeked over the horizon while thinking how nice it was for people that didn't have to work the day before Christmas. But I had a year-end real-estate closing to finish today and I would be passing out Christmas bonuses to my employees. I had to go to work.

I unlocked the glass door to the building, walked across the lobby and flipped on the lights. As I turned back to relock the door, a broad-shouldered, six-foot African-American man was inside and pointing a pistol at me. He was wearing desert fatigues, brown-leather army boots, and a knitted olive-green face mask. My chest grew tight.

"Get on your belly!" he commanded.

The word belly triggered a mental alarm. A few days before, Tacoma had been in the national news with a story about robberies and execution-style murders. Witnesses who had seen the killer fleeing a mini-mart (and a gas station two days later) had reported that he was Black and dressed similarly to the man who was now threatening me.

My office personnel wouldn't be here for another forty minutes. My partner, another early riser, was out of town for the holidays. I had to get close enough to the robber to somehow deflect his gun.

"I have money," I said. I took out my wallet and moved toward him.

He backed up, and then in classic military style he crouched with his gun in both hands, chest high, arms extended.

"I won't say it again," he said. "On your belly, or I'll blow your fu----- head off where you stand."

I hesitated for only a moment, weighing my options, before dropping to one knee. My mind was racing. My God, he's going to kill me!

He pointed to the floor in front of him. "Toss the wallet over here." Then he added, "Get on your belly!"

The solution came to me like a bolt of lightning. I threw the wallet, like I would a Frisbee, toward his face. His hands and gun flew up to protect his eyes.

I took two quick steps and dived behind the four-foot-long reception counter.



By the time he came around it, I had crawled into the dark hallway, to the inner offices, and was pressed against the wall. He stopped a few feet away, listening. My heart pounded. He couldn't see into the corridor because there were no skylights and the doors to the offices were closed.

He stood there, outlined by the dawn light coming through the front window. It seemed an eternity. Finally, he backed up. I heard the door open and close. Thinking it might be a ruse to get me to show myself, I remained pressed against the wall.

Then I saw him through the window. He dashed across the lawn and into the woods.

I tore down the hall and opened the fire exit door. I took a quick look to make certain he was nowhere in sight and then sprinted through the landscaping to an apartment house. I woke the manager and while gasping for breath—I was still hyperventilating—told him what had happened. The manager let me in, slammed and bolted the door and called the sheriff.

Two patrol cars, with sirens blaring, screeched to a halt in the parking lot five minutes later. The precinct was only blocks away. The deputies, one with a German shepherd, came out of their cars with pistols drawn. It took a few moments for my heart rate to come down before I could speak coherently.

After I explained what had happened, the deputy released his dog. The shepherd immediately picked up the scent and bounded into the woods. The two cops and I followed in close pursuit. The dog lost the scent in a parking lot on the other side of the woods.

"He had a getaway car stashed," the shepherd's handler said.

Then the officer told me that the robber was undoubtedly the same person who had killed the gas-station attendant and mini-mart manager. The deputies did not think it was a random robbery. They believed I had been stalked. Probably the killer had seen me one morning getting out of my new Lincoln in front of a dark office building, and returned today to see if I followed a pattern.

When the deputies learned that my wallet, which the robber had taken with him, contained a large amount of cash—Christmas bonuses—they advised me not to go to the office early for a few days, because the man might try again. They also suggested that I install an automatic gate in my home driveway and erect a security fence around the perimeter of my yard. I did both.

I stopped at the sheriff's precinct two weeks later. The detective assigned to my case told me there were no leads. He believed the assailant was a Fort Lewis soldier who had committed the robberies prior to being transferred.

As I left the precinct, I overheard the detective tell the duty officer, "That man is lucky to be alive."

Encounter

A few days before my son Sterling left for college preseason football practice, I asked him to pick me up in South Tacoma, where I was having Wendy's Mercedes waxed.

When I arrived, there were no parking spaces so I left the car in front of the adjoining business and headed to the detailer's shop.

Sterling had followed me. He pulled over and waited.

"You can't park there!" someone shouted at me.

A goliath with washboard muscles rippling beneath an undersized shirt, with rolled up sleeves, was scowling at me from the doorway of his next-door business.

"I'll only be a minute," I answered, and continued on.

Before I reached the detailer's door, pounding footsteps echoed in my ear. I turned and, in disbelief, saw Goliath, with a baseball bat raised over his head, coming at me.

Sterling, who had seen what was about to happen, jumped out of his car and, before Goliath reached me, was between us. "You touch my dad and I'll kill you." Sterling wasn't nearly as big as Goliath, but he was just as muscular.

Whatever testosterone Sterling had excreted, it was effective. Goliath turned and, without a word, walked away.

While I dropped off the keys at the detail shop, Sterling stood guard. We didn't leave until the Mercedes was moved inside the detailer's garage.

When later that day, Sterling took me to get the Mercedes, Goliath's business had already closed, to my great relief.



Jim, Ashley (Sterling's sister) and Sterling at Colorado College.

Grandchildren, you too may one day face a life threatening situation. When you do, do as my mother did when confronted by the cougar or I did when confronted by the killer in my office: trust your instincts, assess your options, choose a course of action, and act decisively.