## TRISH CARNEY

*Bobcat Mt. Tamalpais,* 2009
Color pigment print

COURTESY THE ARTIST

## HELEN REED LEHMAN

# Wildcat

## An American Life

The wildcat was tawny and whiskered, with impossibly large feet and a muscular body. His ears were tufted in black. So was his stub of a tail. He weighed about forty pounds. That year, 1946, he would come about three times a week to look at Ted and Helen Reed through the picture window in their living room in Rancho Santa Fe, a wealthy and countrified suburb of San Diego.

Their daughter watched the wildcat too. I was also named Helen, but I was called Tigger.

When Ted and Helen were quarreling, the sight of their lovely visitor made them quiet down. Sometimes they speculated about why he came to look at them. Maybe he had been tame at one time. If so, what was done to him was a double betrayal. The people who had "owned" him betrayed him by releasing him into the outside world, and the men who set their dogs on him betrayed him with their harassment.

It was not the only betrayal in my family at that time.

The cat bounced around outside of the window as though inviting the humans to come join him. We contented ourselves with looking. He was beautiful.

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The wildcat was driven into a culvert near our house and cornered there by men and dogs. It turned him into a snarling, spitting beast. The culvert was about six feet long and three feet wide. It was roofed by dirt. It carried water off the road in the rainy season.

Helen was a shy woman, but she tried to remonstrate with the cat's tormentors. "What you are doing to that beautiful animal is wrong." The men stared at her in disbelief, then resumed egging their dogs on. When some boys came by on their bikes, she said, "Children, these are wicked men, and you shouldn't watch what they are doing."

Shame-faced, the men sniggered at Helen. The boys moved on. The men went back to jumping around and encouraging their dogs.

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Helen was the daughter of a lumber baron named Hiram Stewart. Her father owned stands of timber in Wisconsin and Oregon. Helen grew up with her parents and her older brother in Wausau, Wisconsin. In 1898, when she was ten,

she danced on the logjams, like the lumberjacks, to loosen the logs so that they would float downstream. The men didn't tell on her, although it was a dangerous thing to do, and her parents would not have approved. She pretended she was really dancing, doing the Turkey Trot and other dances of the day.

But that year the family decided to get the Wisconsin cold out of their bones, and they began to move around the country. Helen went to school in Biloxi, Mississippi, where the children called her "Yankee" and hit her. Then they moved to Arizona, where Helen learned to ride a horse. She became a good rider, and passed the passion on to her daughter—I thank her for that.

When Helen was through with high school, she told her parents that she wanted to go to college and become a biologist. Those were the early years of the twentieth century, when it was unusual for girls to go to college. Her parents sent her to a finishing school in Virginia, where she learned to be "mannerly." Still, she never let go of her connections to the natural world, and she could sympathize with that wildcat I grew up with more than the other neighbors did.

Genteel boredom beset her. The family had kept the house in Wausau, and she returned there. No longer would she dance on logs. But that is where she would marry Ted.

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Ted Reed was a flimflam man who back then called himself an "efficiency engineer." Helen's father hired him to evaluate the efficiency of his mill. While he was "evaluating," Ted was also wooing the owner's daughter.

Ted had led a life full of incident and excitement, and poor, bored Helen was impressed by his worldliness. He had run away from home in high school and joined a minor league baseball team in Tennessee. When he got sick of living on what a tank town team would pay him, he wrote home asking for money to return to Detroit. His father answered that he would have to get home by himself. How he did so I don't know.

Ted went to college, where he learned enough to present himself as an efficiency engineer. In the summers, he worked for a theatrical troupe called Jessie Bonstelle's Minstrels. He played Will Scarlet in Bonstelle's production of *Robin Hood*. He sang a song called "Brown October Ale."

Jessie Bonstelle must have been a good director. She told her actors to look for the verbs in their speeches, and enact those verbs. Years later, when I was starting out as a professional actress, and doing some Shakespeare, my dad wrote to me about finding the verbs. I wrote back, "You're telling me what method teachers teach." But he said he didn't have any truck with that method.

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The young couple moved to Detroit, where Ted got a job working as a reporter with the *Free Press*. A showman at heart, he promised his readers spectacular Fourth of July fireworks, which he was unable to bring about. That was when the First World War came to the United States. The War Department sent a train throughout the Middle West, with Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford, and Charlie Chaplin on board to sell war bonds. Ted was sent by his paper to cover the train's visit to Detroit.

Douglas Fairbanks was an easy, friendly man. He and Ted struck up a friendship. Fairbanks invited Ted to come to Hollywood and work for him. So things that turn out to be momentous are entered into casually. Especially for Ted.

Helen was happy to move to California. Her parents had relocated to Pasadena. Besides, the Spanish flu was raging, and the Reeds had two small boys. Helen was glad to move them to what she considered a more salubrious climate.

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Ted directed some movies for Fairbanks, then worked as the production manager on pictures like *The Black Pirate* and *The Thief of Bagdad*. He and Victor Fleming, who later directed *Gone with the Wind* and *The Wizard of Oz*, became good friends. In 1936, when I was five, I heard my dad on the phone, talking to someone called "Bill." My father said, "My little daughter is here, Bill." Then, to me: "W. C. Fields wants to talk to you. Be nice."

I took the phone. "Hello, Mr. Fields."

In that iconic drawl, Fields said, "Hello there, dear. Are you still hanging around that old man?"

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When the wildcat appeared, and Helen was unable to dissuade its tormentors, she returned home and began to cry. The cat's life and his dignity were being taken from him.

Ted was affected by her tears, and by the cat's plight. He embraced her. They had been quarreling that morning, and it was a relief to be so close. The rancor was gone for now, though it would come back. Helen hated Ted's infidelity and she brought it up whenever they fought.

Ted said, "Those women don't mean anything to me, Helen. It's you I love."

"You have a strange way of showing it!"

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In 1947, before the incident at the culvert, I had heard my parents in the living room, fighting. Helen said, "You took Eleanor to Lake Tahoe when you were supposed to be on a golf holiday. How could you do that to me? Giving the gossips things to say?"

Ted objected, "I took her mother, too."

Helen said, "Ha! Having Sadie chaperone her daughter is like sending the hen to guard the fox coop. Are you going to tell me that Eleanor is just another doxie who means nothing to you?"

The wildcat came to the window. They were mesmerized into silence. His beautiful presence was anodyne.

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When I was fifteen, Helen used me as a sounding board. We were driving in the station wagon.

"Your father took Eleanor on a trip," she told me. "He went to Tahoe with her. The Watsons were there, and saw them. Now the whole town knows about it!"

I said, "Well, Mother, get a divorce."

Helen was taken aback. "I don't want a divorce. Your dad has given me four wonderful children, and he *is* my husband."

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Then I remembered something that happened when I was five or six. I woke up one night to the sound of my parents quarrelling. I heard father saying he wanted a divorce, and that he would leave even if he didn't get one.

I began crying, caterwauling, carrying on, begging him not to leave.

"Daddy, don't go away! Don't leave!"

In the face of all this racket, my brother Bob came in my room and carried me to the room he shared with my brother Jim. They both smoked cigarettes. To quiet me, they began a mock contest to see who could blow the biggest smoke ring. They made me laugh while I cried.

After a while, my father came in, looking exhausted and defeated. He said, "I'm not going away. It's all right." He sounded so not-all-right that it frightened me.

I found out later that he wanted a divorce in order to marry Evelyn Laye. She was a star of the London music halls. She did a Noel Coward piece, *Bitter Sweet*, on Broadway, and made several movies. She was married at the time of the affair with my father.

Mother told my dad that she would exact alimony and child support for the divorce. "Do you still want to throw me over for Evelyn?"

This story puts my father's protestations of love for my mother in question. What it says about her is hard for me to think about.

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My father was sent to Texas by his studio, Paramount, to direct *I Wanted Wings*, a saga of the air force. It starred William Holden, Ray Milland, and Veronica Lake. Lake came on set one day with her hair over one eye. My dad told her to leave it like that, he liked the look. It became her signature. But Dad hated the blistering Texas weather. He asked to be put on another picture. Paramount said no, so he quit.

Mother never let him hear the last of that.

"You should have gone through your agent to complain. And another thing…."

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Before long my father started taking me with him to visit his girlfriend, Eleanor McGowan. I suppose I was the beard in the relationship, but it seemed innocent to me. We went to see Eleanor's parents, too. Eleanor's father was Lou McGowan, who had been a Boston politico, friendly with John Kennedy's grandfather, Honey Fitz.

Whenever we got to his house, Lou McGowan was in his cups. His invariable greeting to me was, "Hello there, Tig. How's your horse?" I've had several horses during my

life, beginning with Bonny, a buckskin mare who was my childhood companion. To me they have always been a solace and a delight. I had a palomino mare called Marigold. I got her in 1990, and retired her to a ranch where they care for old horses in 2000. I had a beautiful running quarter horse called Kipadeck, who had run two races, preferring to stay in the middle of the herd so as not to be caught by wolves from the front or the back. So of course he didn't win. He was sold as a pleasure horse. He *was* a pleasure to ride. He was called Kipadeck because one grandfather was Top Deck, a famous quarter horse, and the other was Kiptis Warrior. He was a descendant of Man o' War.

I thought Eleanor was beautiful. She looked like Myrna Loy. Her accent was pretentious. She sounded like an Englishwoman trying to seem American. She said "darling" as "daalin'." My father was impressed.

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To get away from the trials of her marriage my mother resorted to alcohol. She was a convert to the "sophistication" of the 1920s. It had become acceptable for women to use cocktails as men did. She slipped from use to abuse in a short time.

As a child of four, I resented my mother's drinking. I asked a woman who worked for us, "Can we substitute orange juice for that orange stuff she drinks?" I was disappointed by her answer.

Mother told my brother Ted she wanted to stop drinking, so as to take better care of me. I was six. Ted was a grown man, already in AA. He wanted to take Mom to a meeting. She said, "I don't want to go to confession in front of all those drunks." Ted gave her the Big Book, a staple icon of AA members. She did well with that for twenty years. Then, when she was seventy years old, she began to drink again. My father had died, and I think she figured, "What the hell."

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When the crisis with the wildcat happened I was in junior high, and I began having what I've been told were "fugue states." I would come to my senses, say, in the library at school, with no idea where I'd been, or how I got there. This happened too often for comfort. People who know about such things tell me that the raging hormones of adolescence caused these fugue states. I didn't tell anyone about them at the time. I was afraid they would think I was crazy.

Despite the fugue states and my parents' quarrels, I was happy in those days. One evening at twilight I was jogging through an orange grove on my mare, Bonny. I paused to pick an orange. With my leg crooked over the pommel of my saddle, I ate the orange while Bonny grazed. I thought, "Hot damn, I'm lucky!" Like my young mother, I was comforted by nature, by trees and animals, and I felt that the wildcat living next door would bring us good luck.

Later, I became active in the civil rights movement, and I suppose one reason was that I wanted everyone to have as lucky an adolescence as I did.

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I entered the theater department at San Diego State University in the early 1950s. I worked with Professor Hunton Sellman, who cast me as the female lead in *Caesar and Cleopatra*. A drama critic from the *San Diego Union* called me "a dark young beauty, with all the charm and guile of Cleopatra."

When I graduated, Professor Sellman recommended me to the Cleveland Play House, so I went to Cleveland, where I did well. I did more theater in Los Alamos, New Mexico, and in Minneapolis, where I became a member of the Firehouse Theatre. We took our production of *Peer Gynt* to La MaMa in New York.

Later I became the first artistic director of the theater company known as City Lights of San Jose, in California. City Lights still operates in the same building we rented in 1983. We had been kicked out of the unitarian church. They did us a favor by rousting us, for we were happy with the building we went to, a converted livery stable. We called it City Lights because Charlie Chaplin had given a lecture on Free Love in that building. *City Lights* was his best film before he made *The Great Dictator.* At City Lights I'm proudest of my direction of *Marat/Sade* by Peter Weiss, introducing Silicon Valley to the Theater of Cruelty in the style of Brecht and Artaud.

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Along the way I married Dale Cowan. The marriage was not a success, except that it gave me my two sons. It lasted six years. Dale was a good person, but I divorced him to marry the man I had fallen in love with, Robert Lehman.

I was so happy with Bob, I couldn't believe my luck. I worked at being a good wife. But then, like my mother, I began an affair with alcohol. It started as a glass of sherry with my husband before dinner. No harm in that. We were in love, and it was romantic to share a drink.

We were living in a suburb of Minneapolis, where Bob was the senior minister of the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis, when we learned that he had cancer. The world fell apart. A glass of sherry before dinner became half a jug of sherry after dinner. I thought of drink as my friend, helping me cope with my fear and despair. But drink was a treacherous friend. I graduated from sherry to Scotch. Then I would drink what I could find. When the cancer was declared to be in remission, and later the doctor said it was cured, I didn't stop drinking. My duplicitous "friend" wouldn't let go.

My husband had some parishioners who were Japanese-American. They invited us to dinner. Before we went, I fortified myself with Scotch. When we got to their house, I drank some more.

I berated them. I said, "You Japs bombed Pearl Harbor." They were perfectly nice people, but the drink took over. They had been children when they and their parents were put in one of Roosevelt's concentration camps. They weren't traipsing over the Philippines, raping and pillaging.

I'm ashamed of this incident, and of other things I did.

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I was in treatment for alcoholism at St. Mary's Hospital in Minneapolis.

At St. Mary's, we were put into groups like therapy groups. We were encouraged to ridicule each other: "You lousy drunk! You neglected your kids so you could drink!"

Another woman and I were given the task of sorting laundry. The laundry room was cavernous, and echoed. She and I threw dirty sheets and cloths at each other. We shouted insults. A staff member heard us, and came in to break it up. I suppose he thought we were having too much fun for penitents.

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Bob and I became foot soldiers in the army of civil rights. I watched the people who marched with Doctor King over the Pettus Bridge get charged into by mounted police, on television. These people included my husband. When Bob called me to say he was all right, I asked, "Are you going back next summer?" He said he was. I said, "I'm going with you!" And I did.

We marched with thousands of others in the streets of Jackson, Mississippi, in 1965. We marched into jail deliberately. These marches were organized by Fannie Lou Hamer of Freedom Democrats fame. She headed an alternate delegation to the Democratic National Convention in 1964. She announced, "We're tired and we want to sit down." They were not seated, needless to say.

The marchers stayed in a church retreat called Mt. Beulah. It was a large porticoed building with many bedrooms. In the evenings, Mrs. Hamer went to every bedroom door and knocked loudly, shouting, "Is there any hanky-panky goin' on in there?"

"No, Mrs. Hamer."

"Better not be!"

Later, I worked in New Orleans for John O'Neal's Free Southern Theater. I directed plays for him. I am proud of my part in the struggle.

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But what keeps coming back to me is the wildcat's struggle, when the dogs were worrying him in the culvert. They jumped at him, then retreated swiftly to avoid his claws.

Responding to my mother's tears, my father went to tell the men to go away. When they ignored him, he drove off to get the sheriff. The sheriff figured that he had better humor this Hollywood type. He drove to the culvert, and told the men to call off their dogs and leave.

We never saw the wildcat emerge from the culvert. Was he so wounded that he couldn't leave? I hope he survived, though we never saw him again. Yet he remains a healing presence in my life.

**Helen Reed Lehman** was born in Los Angeles. She moved with her parents and her brothers to Rancho Santa Fe, in San Diego county, when she was nine years old. They lived there until Helen started college, and her parents moved to Del Mar. She went to San Diego State, where she majored in Theater. She had a career in theater.