

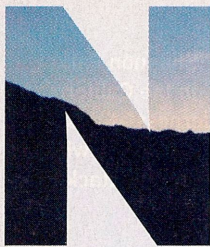
**BONUS READ**

# **C O R N E R E D**

**She stopped at  
a turn in the trail  
and locked eyes  
with a deadly  
predator**

**BY KENNETH MILLER**





## Nothing about the River Trail suggests

it might be a place where death waits patiently in the shadows. The footpath, in Central California's Sequoia National Forest, winds above the swift Kern River, passing through stands of incense cedar, live oak and digger pine. The grade is gentle, a state highway runs close by, and the laughter of kayakers floats up from the glittering stream. Families often crowd the trail, heading for a swim or an hour or two of fishing.

On June 26, 2004, a young medical-equipment saleswoman named Shannon Parker set off down the path, dressed in tennis shoes, a tank top and a bikini bottom. Her boyfriend of 18 months, Loyola University law student Mathias Maciejewski, and his classmates Jason Quirino and Ben Marsh were with her. It was six o'clock on a Saturday evening, and though the summer sun was still far from setting, the narrow canyon was already growing dark. The four friends were the only hikers. But they were not alone.

Despite the scenery, Shannon, 27, didn't much want to be there. A proudly citified country girl, she saw little point in hiking; for exercise, she preferred the health club near her apartment in Santa Monica, more than 100 miles due south. Her idea of beauty had more to do with firm abs, a good hairdo and a sexy pair of jeans than with an untamed landscape. When she went to the beach, she kept to the sand—the thought of sharks made her nervous. Mathias, however, was an avid trekker who'd bagged peaks in Ecuador and Peru. He begged her to join his weekend expedition, so she drove in from her parents' place in nearby Bakersfield. The group spent the day playing in the river, and planned to have a last splash before returning to camp for dinner.

After they walked about a mile, Mathias declared that he had found the perfect spot. To Shannon, however, the path down to the water appeared treacherous; she'd had enough boulder-hopping for one day. "I'm going to the car," she called as the guys sprinted for the rapids.

"I dropped my sunglasses somewhere," Mathias hollered back. "See if you can find them."

Shannon hadn't gone far when she found something else: a dun-colored mountain lion, crouching 20 feet in front of her in the brush along the edge of the trail. She and the animal locked eyes for a split second. Then it hissed, bared its teeth and leapt.



**According to researchers,** there've been just 88 mountain lion attacks in North America since 1890, and 20 were fatal. Dogs kill about a dozen people every year—"way more than have been killed by cougars," says Lynn Sadler, president of the Mountain Lion Foundation, a conservation group based in Sacramento, California. The predators' main quarry is deer, and no one knows why they occasionally sample human flesh. One theory is mistaken identity: A cougar's eyesight relies largely on shape and movement, and under certain circumstances a person may resemble meatier prey.

However rare, there is a special, primal horror in a cougar attack—one that calls up some of our species' most ancient nightmares. A mountain lion generally kills a deer by crushing the animal's windpipe in its powerful jaws. Since humans have shorter necks, cougars most often latch onto the head, and then shake the victim back and forth like a house cat playing with a bird.

That's what happened to Shannon. The cougar clamped its sharp teeth onto the right side of her face and pulled her to the ground. But she fought back. She pummeled and kicked. She thrust her hand into the lion's mouth to keep its jaws from closing tighter. At 5'3", she was smaller than her 6' adversary, but her gym-toned muscles served her well. So did her attitude. "She was always super-stubborn," says her younger brother, Raymond. "She was beautiful, she was sweet, but she wasn't gonna roll over for anyone."

As they struggled, the combatants slid down the steep embankment; they came to rest about 20 feet off the trail, with Shannon on her knees, her head to the ground, the lion still locked on. Her body lay roughly parallel with the river, 80 feet below. The cougar tried to drag her farther into the brush, but she held fast, bracing her feet against a boulder and a tree. The two fell into a stalemate, the silence broken only by the creature's panting. Shannon felt no pain—her adrenaline and endorphins took care of that—and she was more



**Shannon, with Mathias in 2003, was known for her striking looks and "super-stubborn" attitude.**



furious than afraid. This is ridiculous, she thought. I'm not going to die. She spent a moment praying before she began to scream Mathias's name.



**Mathias and Shannon were** a striking couple; his dark, chiseled features nicely complemented her pert good looks. They were equally obstinate as well, though he tended to be taciturn, while she could be impatient and volatile. They had locked horns often, over everything from where to have dinner to where their relationship was heading. Back at the swimming spot, Mathias decided that it would be better to catch up with Shannon, so the guys ditched their plan to take another plunge in the river. A few minutes after she left, Mathias climbed back up to the trail, with Jason and Ben straggling behind. Then he heard her. "I could tell she was hurt by the way she was screaming," he says. "I thought she'd fallen off the trail and hurt herself."

He broke into a run, and as he drew closer he saw that something had her by the head. Mathias, who grew up in Hawaii, had never seen a cougar; at first he took it for a badger. He yelled to his friends to hurry, and skidded down the ravine. Not until he reached Shannon did he realize what she was grappling with. The beast stared at him impassively, its eyes golden and unfathomable. It smelled slightly gamy. "Please get it off me," Shannon cried.

"I will, babe," he answered, and she immediately grew calmer.

Mathias is a methodical man, given to quick decisions and the relentless pursuit of their conclusions. This situation, however, was unlike anything he had encountered on South American peaks or in his two years of law school. His first thought was to simply pull Shannon away; he hoped that the lion would lunge at him and let her go, and that he could then somehow kick it down the hill. He positioned himself behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. But as he tugged, the cougar pulled in the opposite direction, its teeth piercing deeper into her face. "No, no, no," Shannon said. "That hurts."

By then, the others had arrived. Jason tossed Ben his truck keys and shouted, "Go get help!" As Ben ran toward the trailhead, Jason and Mathias tried to frighten the lion off, shaking their fists and shouting obscenities.

Then Mathias remembered Jason's hunting knife; the guys had teased him about it earlier that day, saying, "What are you planning to use *that* for,



dude?” Standing over the squatting Mathias, Jason passed his friend the weapon. Mathias plunged the three-inch blade into the animal’s shoulder, but there was no reaction. He pulled it out and tried again, jabbing desperately; somehow, the knife slipped from his hand and tumbled into the ravine. The cougar made a low growl, but it didn’t budge.

Jason tried kicking the lion, but lost his footing on the steep incline. “Rocks! Hit it with rocks!” Mathias yelled. Jason, who stands 6’2”, hurled a football-sized stone at the cougar’s back, to no avail. He tried again: nothing. But with the fourth blow, the lion released its grip and stumbled away. Jason grabbed Shannon’s arms, and Mathias began pushing her up the hill.

Before they could reach the top, the cougar sprang forward and fastened



**The three-inch dagger Mathias plunged into the lion’s shoulder**

onto Shannon’s right leg with its teeth and claws. “Smash its head!” Mathias cried. Until then, Jason had avoided the animal’s most vulnerable part, because Shannon’s head might have been injured as well. But now he had a clear shot, and he began slamming the lion’s skull with all his strength. Under normal conditions, Jason is a gentle, thoughtful man; before studying law, he had earned a master’s in history. “I’d been in fights when I was younger,” he says, “but I’d never felt

that wild or uncontrollable. I felt all the hatred I’d ever felt in my life.” At last the thick bone cracked, and the cougar went staggering down the hill.

Mathias and Jason hauled Shannon back up to the trail, and were stunned by the extent of her injuries. She was covered with blood, dirt and the cougar’s saliva, and the right side of her body was raked with claw marks and abrasions. During the nine-minute struggle, half her nose had been ripped away. Her right eye had been crushed, its upper and lower lids peeled off, and there was a hole where the left eye’s tear duct had been. Her top lip was torn in two; a line of puncture wounds marched up her cheek. A chunk of her thigh was also missing, exposing bare muscle and bone.

Still, when her friends asked her if she could walk, she said, “Let’s go!” As Mathias helped her hobble toward the trailhead, Jason walked backward, car-



rying a big stone and watching for the enemy. It took 40 minutes to reach the parking lot, where Ben was waiting with a ranger; it would be another 45 minutes before an ambulance arrived. The guys laid Shannon down, placed a towel under her head, and tried to make her comfortable, but the shock of what had happened to her finally set in. Trembling and weeping, she asked over and over again: “Am I going to die?”

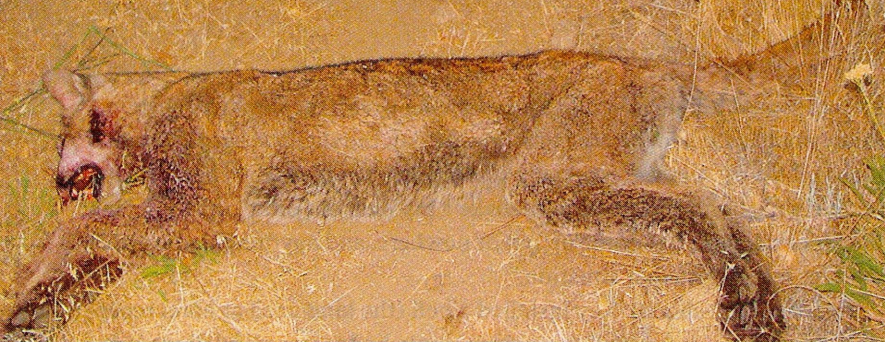
**S**he did not die. That was the cougar’s fate, after Jason and Ben led wildlife officers to the place where it still stood, dazed and wobbling. It took a couple of shots to kill the cat, which proved to be only two years old and severely emaciated; experts guessed that a wildfire had forced it from its usual hunting grounds, and that stronger males had run it off their territory. At 58 pounds, it weighed half as much as a normal cougar, and 50 pounds less than Shannon herself. Its attack—and its uncanny persistence—was evidently prompted by sheer starvation.

Shannon’s suffering was of a different kind. A helicopter met the ambulance at Kernville Airport, and flew her to Kern Medical Center in Bakersfield. Mathias had phoned her parents—Randy, a bankruptcy trustee, and Kay, a homemaker—and when they arrived, the doctors told them that they must not cry in front of their daughter. Shannon tried to comfort them, murmuring, “It’s going to be okay, Mom,” through her tattered lips. After she was stabilized, another copter ferried her to UCLA Medical Center in Los Angeles. Randy and Kay followed in the car, with Mathias as their passenger on the grim two-hour journey. As they traveled, surgeons were assembling to handle the complex case.

At six o’clock Sunday morning, Shannon went into the operating room. A general surgeon attended to her limbs and torso, an ocular surgeon worked on her eyes, and a plastic surgeon—Dr. Robert Schwarcz, who would shepherd her through many more procedures—made initial repairs to her face. Schwarcz found what appeared to be a piece of the cougar’s tooth lodged in the left side of her nasal bone. He had operated on victims of pit bulls trained to tear human flesh, but this mauling was the worst he’d ever seen.

When the patient emerged at one o’clock that afternoon, her family hardly recognized her. “Her face was so swollen, you can’t even imagine,” says Kay. “There was not one place on her body that didn’t look like it had been





**The 58-pound cougar, shot hours after the attack, was half the weight of its prey.**

COURTESY SHANNON PARKER

torn apart.” Such injuries would be traumatic for anyone, physically and emo-

tionally, but they were doubly devastating for a young woman whose sense of self was tied closely to her beauty. “Growing up, she thought she had to look perfect,” her mother recalls.

Shannon had struggled with an eating disorder as a weight-obsessed teenager; as an adult, one of her favorite pastimes was clothes shopping. “It was important to me to really spend some time each morning getting ready—makeup, all that stuff,” Shannon says. “I put a lot into looking good.”

Now her routine would be very different. That Tuesday, when Shannon had recovered sufficiently from the surgery, Kay combed the twigs and tangles out of her daughter’s hair and washed it a dozen times. Then grooming took a backseat to wound care. Mathias and Shannon’s family sat by her bedside and on doctors’ orders took turns around the clock slathering her skin with neomycin. She proved to be allergic to the antibiotic salve, and the blistering rash added to her agony. Meanwhile, scoop-hungry reporters were trying to sneak past hospital security. Shannon couldn’t face them; she couldn’t even face herself.

On Wednesday, she caught a glimpse of her reflection and dissolved in sobs. “I was just crushed,” she says. One moment, she would be joking with her family and friends; the next, she would be seized with gloom or panic. On Friday, when it was time to leave the medical center, Shannon needed a sedative just to make it to the car.

She settled in with her parents at the Bakersfield farmhouse where her mother had grown up. Her brother covered all the mirrors, but no one could protect her from the phantoms that stalked her mind. In the beginning, she slept on the floor by her parents’ bed. When the night terrors came, her



mother would join her on one side of the mattress; the family dachshund, Rudy, would settle on the other. During the day, the slightest surprise would touch off fits of weeping, especially when someone approached her from her blind right side. “I didn’t mean to make a big deal out of it,” she says, “but the mountain lion had come up out of nowhere, and anything that startled me sent me back to that situation.”

To avoid such shocks, Kay installed a bell (the kind used at hotel reception desks) down the hall from Shannon’s bedroom; all visitors were required to ring it. After every crisis, her mother would remind Shannon of her blessings: “We would sit and talk about how lucky we are, because we can see, and we are alive, and we have a great family,” says Kay. “And we’re going to get better.”

Gradually, with the help of a therapist, Shannon’s moods stabilized. But her anguish has not been only emotional. After three futile attempts to reattach her cornea, her right eye was removed last February—in part to ward off a condition known as sympathetic ophthalmia, which sometimes attacks the good eye of a person whose other one has stopped functioning.



Shannon now wears a silicon-and-acrylic prosthesis, tethered to her eye muscles so that it moves naturally. She also wears glasses to protect her left eye from accidents. She has learned to drive with impaired depth perception, but handshakes remain a baffling visual challenge.

Over the past year and a half, she has endured a total of six major surgeries. Last August, Dr. Schwarcz and a partner, Dr. Ronald Strahan, rebuilt her nose. They shored up the left nostril and reopened the airway, which had been blocked by displaced cartilage. Dr. Schwarcz also evened out her lip line, using fat liposuctioned from her abdomen. Just after Christmas, he performed an eyelid lift on her right eye, to eliminate a pronounced droop, and created a pouch of skin to replace her ruined left tear duct. Schwarcz worked on her lips again as well, using another dose of belly fat to improve their symmetry. She will need at least two more operations before the reconstruction process is complete.

After each surgery, Schwarcz injects an excruciating cocktail of steroids and chemotherapy agents into the incisions, to help speed healing and minimize scarring. Some scars are inevitable, though, and during most operations Schwarcz performs an additional procedure to correct marks left by the earlier surgeries. Scar revi-





**Shannon's friend Jason crushed the animal's skull with a rock.**

sion, as it is called, involves making a series of incisions across the offending tissue. "You cut out the parts that

are sunken or raised and try to make it flat," Schwarcz explains. "I do it in the shape of a W, which breaks up the scar and makes it look less linear."

The discomfort caused by all these procedures is difficult to comprehend; each surgery requires weeks of recovery time. Shannon shrugs off the misery. "It doesn't bother me anymore," she says with a laugh. "They can stick me anywhere, and I'm completely immune to it." In truth, her stoicism comes from a fierce mental discipline. "From early on, I had a strong trust in my surgeon. I knew everything he did to me was to help me. And with that, I was willing to take anything. I just made myself numb."

The rewards are finally coming. Last October, she returned to her job selling medical equipment; in December, she moved to a new apartment in Santa Monica. She credits her doctors and loved ones for speeding her climb back to independence, including friends and relatives who pitched in to help pay the \$26,000 in ambulance and helicopter bills not covered by insurance.

Mathias, sadly, no longer figures in her support network; their relationship ended three months after the attack, strained to breaking by the travails that followed. Still, Shannon supported his selection last summer, along with Jason (with whom she keeps in touch), for a Carnegie Medal for heroism. "I've



thanked Mathias a million times,” she says. “I wouldn’t be here without him.”

Those who know Shannon speak of her as a hero as well. They marvel at her fighting spirit, and at her refusal to complain about her long tribulation. “She keeps her eye on the goal as opposed to her pain, which is amazing,” says Schwarcz, who notes that many patients with lesser problems surrender to rage or despair.

**Shannon’s appearance has been restored** to the point where, once again, the first impression she makes is “pretty girl.” She’s back at the gym, and she occasionally visits the local nightspots for drinks with friends. But her ordeal has reordered her values. “Before the accident, I was kind of wrapped up in myself,” she says. “I didn’t really read much. I worked a lot. I liked to go out and have a good time. I was never too interested in art or theater or traveling to other countries. Now I am.” She’s less preoccupied with mirrors. And she’s far more eager to help others in need, whether by tending to an ailing aunt or giving motivational speeches to Bakersfield women’s groups. “I get up and tell my story; I encourage them not to obsess over the small things.

“I still have those moments when I say, ‘Jeez, what crappy luck,’” Shannon admits. “But it’s easier for me to handle challenges now, because they’re nothing compared to what I’ve been through. I’m trying to move on, but I’m not trying to forget what happened to me. It’s written all over my face.”

## SHARING THE WEALTH

*No one likes paying taxes. But the local form used by Middletown, Ohio, lessens the sting just a bit. Here are some of its instructions:*

“If you want the official definition of qualifying wages, take two aspirins and go to the IRS Code Section 3121.”

“Cities may choose to exclude stock options from tax, but we do not. Put another way, if we can tax it, we will.”

“Free advice: If you don’t have a profit in a five-year period, you might want to consider another line of work.”

“Other income can include fees or our favorite, gambling winnings. When you win the lottery, we feel as though we win, too.”

Submitted by JOHN C. CALDWELL