

Bear

I probably knew him best of all. He was a big man, at least a foot taller than me, well over six feet, maybe two fifty but all muscle. He had long blond hair and an ugly scar that started at one ear and went way down to his chin. It looked like it might have been done by a knife. I never knew his real name. Everybody just called him Bear. He told me once that he wouldn't mind coming back as one, "if that's the way it works." He kinda walked like one too, real loose, swinging his arms. Every so often he'd stop, cock his head side to side, and it seemed like he was sniffing the air. A lot of people were afraid of him, but we got along just fine.

We got to know each other 'cause we both stayed at a rooming house, the Riverview Manor on First and Pine. He kept his room real neat. There was a picture of Jesus on one wall. On another, was a picture of a meadow with some trees, and a mountain in the background. "It's the kinda place where I'd like to live, if I ever got the chance," he said, when I asked him about it. He always made his bed, and his clothes were on hangers, or tucked away in the dresser. He'd

take his shoes off before he came in and he made sure I did too. Even the bathroom was clean. The other thing I noticed was an old Gideon bible, on an end table beside the bed.

I was always too embarrassed to invite him into my room, but one time he got a peek. To me it looked pretty normal. Sure, there were some old newspapers, empty beer bottles, and dirty clothes lying around, but I figured I wasn't that different from a lot of other single guys. Bear just shook his head. "Jeez Little Joe, it's a helluva mess. You should do something about it." For a while I tried, but it didn't last.

Sometimes we worked together, mostly under the table, helping contractors tear down buildings or hauling stuff back and forth on a job site. For him, it was nothing to lift big slabs of concrete, but a lot of times I'd be dragging my ass after a couple of hours. When Bear saw how tired I was, he'd tell me to go hide for a while, and he'd do my work as well as his own. Mostly he didn't talk about himself, but I did hear that he worked high steel in New York City, before he got sent to the big house for manslaughter. I asked him about it.

"It started with a fight that got out of hand. I thought he was dead when I left him, so I burned his trailer down to cover my tracks. It turned out that it was the fire that killed him. I took a life and I've been trying to make it right ever since."

When we had the money, we'd go for a drink at the Silver Dollar, and listen to some country and western. It was a nice bar, although maybe it was a little dim, but that was good because it meant you couldn't see the brown stains on the wallpaper. Yeah okay, maybe the tables were a little wonky, and it was true that they all had black cigarette marks, because people forgot to use the ashtrays. But the beer was cheap, and the bartenders were friendly, so long as you had money to pay. Sometimes they even smiled.

It always got real quiet when we came in. Bear hated it if people made noise when the band was playing. Once, when two guys were starting to get into it, he just scowled at them. The smart one took off pretty quick, but the other guy couldn't take a hint. He was too drunk to know any better.

"Come on, you big pile of shit, I wanna piece of you," he said. He was a mean drunk and I'd seen him beat up people before. He'd even sent one guy to the hospital. He was about thirty, maybe ten years younger than Bear and almost as big, but it was mostly fat.

Bear just folded his arms and shook his head slowly. I heard him sigh. It was the same way my old grade three teacher, Mrs. Peabody, used to act when she caught me doing something bad. The whole thing didn't last very long. Bear, he just got those big paws of his around him and lifted him right off the ground. He started shaking him and then he squeezed all the air out of him. When the guy was still, Bear laid him on the floor, real gentle, like the guy was a little baby. I could see his chest moving up and down, but it didn't look like he wanted to get up any time soon. We left before the cops got there.

"Some people have no manners," was all he said.

The day it happened must have been a Saturday, because Bear had almost finished his weekly rounds of the fire hydrants. He said it was important to do it every week, because all that energy had to be released, otherwise bad stuff started to happen. He always wore the same outfit, and he always did it the same way.

"If you don't do it just right, it doesn't work," he told me.

He didn't like to be disturbed once he started. Mostly it wasn't a problem since pedestrians tended to shy away. He'd wear a beaded deerskin vest, a turquoise headband, a clean

white shirt, and freshly pressed blue jeans. He always scrubbed clean and rubbed himself with what he called 'essential oils.'

"You have to be pure before you start," he said.

He'd squat on his haunches and press each thigh firmly against the sides of the fire hydrant. Then he wrapped his arms around the belly of the thing and rested his head on top. He was so big you could hardly see any of the hydrant. More than one woman said it looked sexy, but nobody dared tell Bear that. His eyes were always closed, and his face would be all scrunched up. It looked like he was concentrating real hard. His lips would move, and you knew he was saying something. When he finished talking, he'd get this big smile on his face. I never saw a man look so happy. Then he'd stand up and make the sign of the cross. Each fire hydrant took about five minutes. He told me he did forty-three, all the ones that were in our neighbourhood.

"I'd like to do more, but there's only so much one man can do," he said.

Some people said he'd fried too many brain cells by doing too much acid. Others thought he must have gone crazy, from all the time he spent in the joint. I don't know about any of that, but except for the fire hydrants I never saw him do anything else really strange. Besides, I think he might've been on to something. I had a grandma who was part Cree. She believed there really were good and evil spirits. And that there were holy men who knew all about them. And that they knew just what to do. Maybe Bear was one of them.

I figure he must've been on the way to the park, because they found breadcrumbs and his bible in the old canvas daypack he used to carry. He always had the crumbs with him when he went there. He liked to feed the ducks. I'd run into him when I went there to drink. We'd talk a

bit, and sometimes he took a sip from my bottle. Mostly he'd say no thanks. He'd sit there cross legged just listening. He could hear stuff nobody else could. He knew all the bird songs and he could hear lots of other animals too. He said you could tell which ones were which, by the sounds they made when they moved. I tried it once, but everything sounded all jumbled up. Maybe I'd been drinking too much. The other thing he'd do was to read his bible. He moved his lips like I do, and I'd see him frown when he got stuck on a word.

On the way to the park, there was a row of old wood rooming houses, like where Bear and I lived. They were all flimsy and rundown and full of people like us. There were even some immigrant families who were down on their luck.

You weren't supposed to cook in your room, but people did it anyways. That's probably how it started. Smoke was pouring out of a third story window. We were all standing across the street, watching and waiting for the fire trucks. I figured that everybody was already out because there were half dressed people all around me. Some had old battered suitcases. Others had TV's and radios they'd taken with them. There was even an old lady in a bathrobe holding a birdcage with a canary inside.

When I turned away from the fire, he was right beside me. It freaked me out how he could do that, just sort of be there without anybody ever seeing him coming. His face was all twisted, like he was snarling. He was shaking his head so hard that he seemed to be whipping himself with all that hair. Just behind him was a fire hydrant.

"This wouldn't have happened if I'd got here sooner. This was the last one."

He moved away from the noise of the crowd, and went down on one knee, beside the fire hydrant. He closed his eyes and tilted an ear. He was listening like he did in the park. I listened too, but all I heard were pops and sizzles and stuff falling.

“There’s people still inside,” he said.

He moved fast for a big man. When he got to the top of the stoop, he didn’t bother with the doorknob. Maybe it was too hot. He just put his shoulder down and exploded through that door. I could hear wood snapping and splintering. Then there was a big hole, and I heard a ‘whoosh.’ The fire really started to go. I guess it was all that air coming in. He came out about five minutes later, crouched real low, with two small bodies slung over his back. There was somebody bigger cradled in his arms. He threw them from the top of the veranda onto the lawn in front. A couple of us ran to drag them away. Steam rose from the wet towels he’d wrapped them in. When they started coughing, we knew they’d be OK. I was close enough now that I could smell Bear burning. When we were all far enough away, I looked back, and I saw him for the last time. He was standing straight, his legs wide apart. His arms were stretched high above him. His hair, his clothes, all of him was on fire. He was looking up, and he was shouting something, but the fire was so loud, I couldn’t hear nothing. It got hard to tell him and the fire apart. Then there was a big boom, and everything fell down.

Lately, I’ve been getting this dream. It’s not like the nightmares I have when I’ve been drinking. In the dream, it’s always a warm sunny day. I can’t see it, but I can hear a creek. There’s a field full of berries, red ones, and blue ones. On it, there’s a grizzly just rolling around and yawning.