



## BEAR FEARS

by Norbert Kovacs

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I THOUGHT AT FIRST IT WAS A HIKER'S DARK ST. BERNARD BOWING DOWN the small tree by the West Ledge Trail that hot, muggy afternoon. The animal had stood and brought her weight down on the tree the way a dog might rise on its hind legs to paw her master. I recognized quickly, however, that I was looking at a black bear and no dog. Only a bear had that dark fur, the rounded ears, the jutting snout. I went stiff. My mind filled with vague accounts I had heard of bears chasing and mauling walkers in the woods. What might this bear do if she noticed me? I wondered. Fear crept into my veins.

I decided to follow the little advice for managing a bear encounter that I knew: I kept still and quiet to avoid drawing her attention. Hopeful it would work, I watched the bear lumber towards the trail about fifteen yards ahead. Fear heightened my attention, and I picked up on her features acutely. She had a very distinct face, the eyes a keen black only a shade lighter than her fur, the ears closely cupped, the muzzle tan. Her fur itself showed a midnight black in every inch. She moved slowly through the ferns, her large back shifting at each step. Her size spoke of strength and possible danger, and my eyes glued to her nervously as she emerged on the trail.

The bear did not notice me away on her left as she crossed the path. Her glossy eyes set on the woods before her, and she went at a confident pace into them. I drew a hushed breath once the trail was clear and walked cautiously to where she had passed. Despite how I had worried, I wanted to see where the bear went: call it my curious edge. I reached the point where she had crossed just in time to see her broad, dark side slip past the hemlock trees and disappear. The whole encounter was that short. However, I had seen enough to think the bear impressive. It made me regret I had feared her.

I walked up the trail quietly, alone. In less than a minute, something on the right caught my attention. Two hundred feet through the woods from the same direction my bear had come, I spotted another black bear. He sported the dark, furry bulk of the earlier one. Nose pressed to the ground, he stepped slowly amid the ferns, head sweeping side to side. My interest held to him. Any worry that he might see and come toward me seemed much less than what I had felt previously, the distance and my memory of the first bear keeping it in check.

After brushing at the ferns, the bear headed slowly into the deep woods. He followed a path through the oaks and maples that, while far away, went almost parallel my own trail. I walked along in the same direction, hoping to catch sight of him despite the many trees. The bear went without hurry, head low, shoulders shifting. He had a calm, easy majesty, and I thought I could watch him walk the woods all afternoon. As we went, he turned from the back woods and proceeded towards the trail I was walking. He paced idly, comfortably. I watched him come through the summer green trees and tensed with interest. What might happen if he gets near, I wondered, feeling a quiet excitement.

The bear arrived within twenty feet of where I stood. He stopped advancing when he saw me and raised his head. I looked on his broad face, the dark, neat circles of his eyes that were wide with incredulity. We studied one another as if we were the first of our species ever to have met. I felt I became all eyes and ears; my fear was forgotten. In my eagerness to know the bear, I took a small step forward to see his face in more detail. The sudden move startled him; he quivered. Then, all at once, it seemed my presence was more than he could take. He turned, let out a cry, and ran bellowing back into the woods, heavy legs pounding the forest floor.

Right off, I thought the bear ridiculous for running. What had he to fear when he was a good three hundred pounds and equaled my height simply raising his head? He had sized me up all wrong. However, as I gazed into the woods where he had gone, I felt that I shouldn't go and judge him, not when the other bear had set me on edge only minutes earlier. To take a critical attitude, I also realized, would have been dishonest in a sense. I would have discounted the wonder I felt about our meeting. I knew how unlikely it was to have run into him or the other bear in all those woods. And I had seen things to like in both creatures: their strength, their fabulous ease. Those things seemed more important, looking back, than the fear I had over the first bear and that the second bear had over me. I accepted that as the best I might think of the events as I walked up the trail and left that corner of the woods to the bears.

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