

Bear

By R.J. Cordes

When I was young, my father would take me walking in the woods. We would walk for hours, along whatever trail we found. If we came to a fork, he would always say “Ryan, you should always trust your instincts”, and allow me to pick on my own. Gun to my head, we easily walked hundreds of miles together by the time I was twelve. We’d walk quietly, often never saying much of anything to each other until we came to a fork. My father was a quiet man. He had a quiet life. When he spoke, I listened. I saw him as wisdom incarnate and everything he had to say I took to heart.

I remember turning twelve. I was becoming a young adult, making my own decisions, choosing my own paths. I was watching my father waste away from the cancer. Each day, a little weaker. Each day, we walked a little less. Sometimes I’d look for him and my mother would stop me, she’d say “leave him be, he’s getting his rest”, lest I see him at his weakest. He reeked of death, long before he had to leave our home. The last time I spoke to him, was in a hospital. He was ready to die. He spoke to me, quietly. He told me to take care of my mother and to take care of my brother. To never turn my back on my family, and to accept new friends—no matter who they were or what they looked like, that it was what was in their heart that mattered. He told me to always trust my instincts, and then he was gone.

I became quiet after that, and I didn’t stop walking—after all, I had gotten used to walking alone, and choosing my own paths. I remember it wasn’t much longer than a year after he had passed that *it* happened... I was walking along a mountain trail, it was fall and winter was not far around the corner. The trees had lost their leaves, and the leaves on the forest floor had no life left within them. I had been walking for about 3 miles when I spotted a bear cub. A little black bear, cooing for its mother. I knew logically, that I should stay away—its mother might be near, but my instincts told me no. My instincts told me something I couldn’t exactly articulate, but I knew I wasn’t supposed to leave. I waited, and watched for what seemed like an eternity. Eventually, the bear cub approached me, and laid near my feet. It moved leaves away with its paws and looked up at me, and I felt that through its eyes, I learned everything I needed to know. Its mother had died; this cub was alone. I wrapped it in my jacket and I took it home.

I cared for it long after it had become a young adult, though I never gave it any particular name beyond calling him “Bear”. He tried to come everywhere with me, the people at the pharmacy where I got my mother’s medication weren’t really fans of this. He never missed a walk with me however... and I always let him choose the path.

Finally, after a couple of years, it came time that I’d have to let him go. It was the most painful moment I could remember with the exception of my father passing. He didn’t want to go, but I liked to believe it was his instinct telling him that it was

that time. He walked into the woods with only a single look over his shoulder before disappearing into the brush. I missed him every day, and every walk I took was accompanied by the hope that we might be reunited by chance...

I was twenty-six, when *it* happened. I was walking up the same mountain trail I had walked so many years ago, and right as I turned a corner I saw something I couldn't believe. A full-grown black bear, rubbing its back against a tree. It didn't even notice my presence. I sat looking at him, immense, the king of his domain, an omnivorous tyrant. Logically, I thought, I should stay away, but my instinct told me something that I could articulate in an instant. This was *Bear*. He scattered leaves with his paws the same way he did the first day I met him... and I called to him with a burst of excitement.

"BEAR!" I yelled, and he turned in an instant. He charged forward to greet me and I fell to my knees with tears of joy in my eyes with my arms wide open. As he came within a few feet he stopped. He let out a roar. A roar I had never heard Bear make before—and I came to know the single most important piece of information I had ever acquired in my entire life: this was not *Bear*; this was a bear. He slammed his right paw into my shoulder with a force I could only imagine being replicated by a speeding truck. I hit the ground on my left shoulder and rolled against my will. My heart still had arrhythmia from the vibrations of his roar and I felt blood pour down my armpit, drenching my ripped shirt. He displaced my body with the same ease and carelessness that he displaced leaves. This was inarguably the most painful moment of my entire life. No emotional pain, real or imagined, could trump the gushing lacerations left behind by a 900 pound, mindless, marauding killing machine. I tried to fight, but only for a moment, I had taken a swing at his face, but as I felt tendon being pulled from my wrist I realized it was over. As I continued to be pummeled like the bag of meat I was, I realized instincts can be wrong, and that my father was a moron. I realized that emotion is meant to inform decisions, not command them. I realized I had startled a full-grown black bear, on purpose, and I was dying because of it. I realized that god was dead, life was pointless, and that bears are dangerous.