Bear

A man had a father who was a grizzly bear. They were not on speaking terms. They spoke only when he returned to Texas for the holidays. They spoke like this: all of his family would stand around in the kitchen and talk like people and play cards, or Risk, and then the bear would lumber into the room from outside. Things would grow tense. The man would quietly offer to deal the bear in or to restart the game, but without looking into his eyes. The bear would not speak. He would only rumble, No. He would get his son a beer from the fridge. His great claws raking the amber bottle and cracking it. The bear would linger awhile waiting for something. No one knew what. He would lumber off into the wild again. In this way the man’s father was reliable.

After the man had been home three days, the bear would want to take him out to lunch. Every visit home, this happened. The bear would soft-step up and surprise him. He had a way of getting his message across. When the bear looked into his eyes, the man knew what he wanted. It was a thing they had between them. A place they had been together. His son would know that this was meant to be a special lunch where he was supposed to hear something important that the bear was unable to tell him right then and there. Maybe it would be the end of their long silence. But the needed things were always left unsaid.

The man knew ways to get out of this lunch. He got out of it almost every time. He would run away from the bear, he would slather himself with the smells of wet earth and mossy bark to make hiding easier, he would make up reasons to stay away. The bear had almost died very recently. He was aging, and this near-death thing was a result of that. The man thought that maybe, because of what had happened, the time had come for them to set in order the many difficult things that lay between them. So he stayed closer to home.
The man went out for walks along the cedarlined road that led to his parent’s rented land. He scraped his feet over the red granite pebbles and kicked lichen-smothered sticks and soaked in all the fresh air that he couldn’t get in Los Angeles. At sunrise, the white-hot edge of morning would burn the dew from the trees. Carry it away as steam. He walked through the mist out to the low stone bridge by the cemetery, feeling the rack of his ribs rise and fall, fill and deflate. The road wasn’t that long. He wondered what it was like to live as a bear must live, afraid of everything and nothing.

When the man finished his walk, the bear was there in the kitchen, cooking him breakfast. Every year he would do this same thing, with the breakfast, and every year the man would bow out in favor of some other thing. But this time he waited to see what would happen. The bear broke the eggs in his massive paws and let them fall all over the floor. The bear rumbled and showed his teeth, and bent the scrambling fork into a hook. He stomped around. Sloshed orange juice all over. His huge paws slipped in that and in the eggs. The floorboards crackled, weak like old magic. The man sat at the table alone and hungry, watching. No one else dared be there when the bear was trying to be nice. The bear was furious that he produced burnt toast, and he tramped out the back door to give the scraps to the terrorized dog. The doorframe was clawed to ribbons around the knob. Many exits had been made this way.

The man’s father had become a bear over time. He didn’t just flip a switch one day. It was millions of switches. He flipped them whenever they appeared to him. He flipped them all. Flip, flip, flip. Sixty-seven years of that. And then quite suddenly he was the monster under the bed. The monster beside it. The bear had broken the mirror years before the bristling coat climbed up out of his shoulders and off of his thighs. There was no way for him to see the change.

The bear had gone off on Sunday to church. Inside the house, the man was alone for hours waiting for the bear to return. He wandered silently through bookshelves and down the claw-torn hallways of his childhood. On the wall by his parent’s bedroom, family pictures were canted and fallen. Broken glass all over. The man snuck over the hazards in his sockfeet to look. There was a broken picture
of his mother taken years before her death. Her face was full and warm. The man remembered how hollow she had become after that.

The picture with the twisted metal frame nearest the door was the most intact. It was of the man as a child, his brother, and their father before he had turned bear. In it the pre-bear father held the hand of the man as a boy in his own still regular people-hand. Ragged spines of fur had begun to sprout from the father’s shoulders. His face was twisted up like a half-bear root. The man resolved that he would know this man who in the picture had held his hand so well. He would wipe away the hate from that desolate face and see who he could become.

Before coming home for these holidays, the man’s brother had asked him if he would like to go out and shoot guns again, the way that they used to before he had moved away. The brother had it all arranged. It was meant to be the two of them only. A peaceful day of guns and male bonding. But the man invited the bear to come with them. There was something, some peace within his father that the man imagined in his heart would grow from the bear’s brush with death, something that would allow them to speak again. He thought that things could be different this year. The man’s brother drove bitterly ahead of them in his own car while the man and the bear followed like a thunderhead behind him.

On the way, the bear growled happily and ripped at the rubber on the steering wheel of his fading truck. He drove in his hunched-over way and he nodded and gestured and moaned, and looked over to the man his son who sat as low in his seat as he could. The man watched the passengerside window present the wilting oaks and sloppy rows of round bales in the dew-shined fields that they passed. The bear’s truck was torn all apart on the inside. Scraps of seat leather, and motes of foam, and bits of animal bones. The bear roared a joke at the man and clawed the radio face off and onto the floor by the man’s feet. But the man had rolled down his window to let the wind remove everything else from his ears. He shrugged a smile at the bear from across the wordless wasteland between them, the time would come to talk but it wasn’t now. He didn’t want to say he couldn’t hear him. The bear rolled his window down, too, and stuck his face out into the December air. His jowls flapped like a great big dog. The bear looked happy. He was
not a generally happy thing, and the man thought about how only the silliest things ever seemed to make him this way. He was all backwards with how to be positive about life. Big stuff was all bad news, but stupid private things like flappy jowls he could get a laugh at. The man watched those cheeks and thought that there wasn’t much difference between him and his father right at that moment. He wondered what sort of pain a man feels once he begins to lose himself.

The Bear pulled off at a gas station. He huffed white slobber out of his mouth and curled his lips. He removed the handle of his door getting out. He slogged over into the store without looking back. The man got out too and went around and picked up his father’s doorhandle and put it back on, and then he followed his father inside. The man got some bullets for his gun and a bottle of water with electrolytes. A bag of salted sunflower seeds. The old-country counterlady rang up the things. She scratched the bear under his folds of neck skin but jumped back when he slammed his money-filled paw on the counter. The man quietly asked the bear for the chance to pay. The bear ignored him. It was his way. The man was wearing his father’s jacket, which was much too big for him. In this great-big musty coat, he felt small like he had when he was a little boy and his father was not yet fully a bear.

As a boy, he had gone off with his father into the wild woods behind their home. They walked along in boots with red laces and carrying guns. He had carried a pellet gun, then. They talked very little. The woods were a dark and terrifying place to him, and his father was the king of it.

His father walked ahead of him, a man still, and more quickly than the boy could reasonably keep up with. He tromped noisily over logs until his father glared back at him to be silent. He had not dared to yell out after his father to wait, to hold back and protect him from what lurked out there. Silence, his father had told him, will save your life. It was fear that he gave in to when he sat down and held his knees to his chest as the sun fell down behind the skeletal trees. His pellet gun lay beside him, useless. Around him the woods became a mystery. Sticks snapped that could have only been broken by monsters.
His father came and found him in full dark. He walked with a trained stealth that brought him within feet before the man heard him. His father bent down before him and whispered to him to get up. Get his rifle. Keep up. He had followed his father home, stumbling over everything.

In the weak porchlight, he had told his father he was sorry. He said he had been afraid. This was the only time the father had ever spoken this way to his son: his father held his finger up in the air by his face and then pulled it down like turning off a light switch that hovered there. Like a trigger. His father told him that this was what had saved his life. This, he said, had saved him during the war. This invisible switch. He should think of whatever it is that he fears, and then look up into his mind to find what gives it power. His father held him by the shoulders, like a steering wheel. Just flick it off, he said. These words hung from his father’s mouth: doing this will remove the thing he fears from his heart. His father’s breath was hot in his face when he said this. Bitter and stale and serious. There was no softness in his father’s voice. His father told him to go inside the house, and he went immediately. Through the window in the kitchen door, he watched his father walk back into the dark woods.

The man’s brother was older than him, and he had dealt with the problems with the bear, largely, many years before. He dealt with them by just telling the bear outright how he felt about the things the bear did. When the bear had, in a moment of anger, torn his grandson’s arm off at the elbow, the brother had revoked the bear’s privileges. The brother sat the bear down over lunch and told him this: he could not see his grandson as frequently, or be alone with him anymore. He was a kindhearted boy, and the bear was not kindhearted at all. Of course the bear was very sorry about the child’s arm, the man knew. But he also knew that there is a place, a vast wilderness where bears must live or come from. A place where strength and power are held above all other things. A place where it pays no dividends to be kind. This was an obvious thing to the man, but his brother seemed not to understand.

The man’s brother had recently almost become divorced. The counsellor they saw helped him to get to the bottom of things. It turned out to all link to the bear somehow. The man’s brother said that over time he has come to think of their father as a weird uncle rather than as a dad. He said that he was old
enough now that he didn’t really need a dad anymore, so it worked. His brother said, soberly, that the bear had not parented them, which was why things were hard for them now, as men. They didn’t talk about any of this stuff when they were out shooting. That was another time. But now when they went places together and did talk, they understood that their scars were undeserved.

Now they were at the place where they had gone to shoot guns. Some private land owned by a friend of a friend. The brothers shot their guns and had a little competition going about who was better than the other. They included their father in this.

The bear shot a little .22 rifle. His favorite. He held it in such a way that because of where the casings came out of the gun when he fired it, the hot brass wiggled down through his fur and burned him. The man thought that the way his father held the tiny gun was stupid and comical. Tiny like a toy in his paws. It was dainty, the way he held the gun, but it was the only way he could hit anything.

This time was no different: he shot, and there went the tiny embers down to his skin. He shook his forelimb around and then moaned a silly little peal like maybe bears do when they are in a small amount of pain but want it to seem like no big deal. But the bear’s rage bubbled up. The bear kept shooting that way, and the hot brass dug up little growls of sloppily buried anger. His sons enjoyed the spectacle. They thought it was a little bit of peace. Something that was okay for all of them to laugh at because it happened every year. The bear lowered the tiny gun and rumbled from the deep part of his chest. The bear could dish, and dish, and dish, but when a little laugh came out of the man, the bear roared at him. A roar to remind the son that teasing a bear came with consequences. He would devour him! He fiddled roughly with his rifle. The bear hit the side and broke the scope off. His anger was right there on the surface. He roared at his son again. The man cowered in fear. He thought he was a fool for inviting his father along, for thinking that they could speak, peacefully maybe, this year. His father was a bear. This was the way his father was.

The older brother said to the bear fearlessly, oh my god, dad.
The bear pulled his rifle up and shot at the targets again, three times in quick succession, and there went the hot casings wriggling down to his skin. He flung his gun at the ground and stomped on it, and then away into the wild alone. The casings that had become stuck in his fur plopped out behind him onto the rusted dirt.

The man’s brother said, this is why we can’t bring him anywhere. He’s a child, he said.

The man said quietly that he was sorry.

His brother said that he shouldn’t be. He grabbed the man by the shoulder and shook him like a brother might. He told the man that it was not his fault.

His father was full of rage. He could be heard all through their home. As a boy, he would hide away in closets, in the attic, and he would listen to his parents fight. His father roared in words he could not understand. His father wanted things a certain way. He would stomp around the house in a furious heat. After the man’s mother had given up, the bear would seek out his children. The boy would rarely let himself be caught. He would disguise himself as a pile of dirty clothes. He would become the pillows of his bed. He would run away through the window into the wilderness where he had been lost. He would run until the sunlight fell behind the western hills. He would fling himself into a thicket overhung by a fallen oak. He would wait there until nightfall came and the woods became the wild place he had feared. The bear roared after him. The sound was his name. He heard the violence within it. There was nothing that he feared more than the bear. The bear would find him. The bear would smell his fear and come to him and that would be it.

He sat silent in the thicket in the dark woods. The bear was very near. He heard him breathing. His great weight padding the ground. He waited for the bear to discover him. He waited for the bear to sniff him out, to find him cowering there amongst the broken branches of that vast and changing wilderness. He remembered holding his finger up, invisible in the pitch black. He flicked the switch over, and over again. It never did anything for him.
The man went out again down the cedarlined road from his parent’s house. He jogged to empty, electronic music. The deer were out there with him, chewing judgmentally beside the road, and the coyotes leered out from their alleys at his pasty legs. They seemed to know that he never ran except when he was here. The man wondered how they felt about living so close to a monster. He wondered if they knew. He wondered what sorts of evil the bear might do to such stupid creatures as these. He wondered how they had become this way, timid and frail, stuck out in this pathetic forest eating weeds and waiting for someone to come along and say what they were there for. These things had made their choices and now they are here on the fringe of the wilderness, waiting. They will wait forever. At the house he showered and thought about this some more. He thought that no one can tell you who you are.

In the living room, news was on the television. Trouble, always.

The man’s brother asked him if he felt like he had been tricked. Like if he had been used. This was in reference to the years that the man had spent fighting in an unpopular and useless war.

The man shrugged and said that everything, really, every war or country where we fight, we eventually leave and things go relatively back to their normal state.

The man’s brother said he supposed that was true.

The brother said, but is it painful, seeing things fall apart again like this? He motioned at the television.

The man said, what’s painful was watching you shoot.

They had a little laugh at that.

But the man thought about this pain that his brother had mentioned. He thought that his brother must have meant the pain of realizing that all of his efforts, all of the destroyed parts of him, even the deaths of his friends were ultimately spent on nothing at all. There wasn’t anything he could say that his brother would understand. The man realized this: there were many things he himself didn’t understand,
and with no one to help explain these things for him, he would never be able to. He thought about his war, this one on television, and about his father’s war. He thought the things they had done and seen. He thought that the men who had seen and done those things were fundamentally different than the ones that were here, now, not talking about them. He thought, as he always did on the last day of his visits home, about the many times that his father had almost spoken, had almost arrived at some sort of setting-in-order. He thought about how long he had waited for that.

On the television, a man shot a rocket-propelled grenade off into the distance.

His brother asked him what it was like to live in California.

The man said that it was far away, and that was enough.

The bear rumbled in from outside. He came in and ripped up the carpet with his foreclaws and roared at the man and his brother and his brother just took a casual sip of his drink and stayed right where he was. But the man got up and went back into the kitchen to do anything. The bear sat violently down into the chair the man had been in. Sloshed his drink all over. The bear kicked the ottoman and tore at the chair’s armrest, and he roared at the man’s calm brother until thick strings of spit hung from his lips.

The man in the kitchen thought how things had seemed so different at the beginning of this trip home but now felt exactly the same as every other time. But he thought, too, about this cyclical act of forgetting that he engaged in. Each year he returned home with some sort of hope, but then left without it. He thought that it was a sickening thing how well time cleans things up just enough so that it never has to fix them. The man stood leaning on the counter in the kitchen. He saw his brother’s defiant face. The man watched, in awe of the power that hatred and war held over love and peace. His father’s shoulders rose and fell in that wrecked chair in the living room. The man wondered how many more years he had left before his father would be dead. He wondered what that would even do. He knew that it would do nothing, quite effortlessly, if he let it. His father’s would be another life wasted on almost getting somewhere with the hard stuff. Almost making a way out of the wilderness of guilt.
The man walked back into the living room and placed his hand on the bear’s horrible shoulder. The bear stopped with his roar and looked up at the man. There was something in the bear’s dark eyes that looked like hope.

The man said, dad, how about that lunch?

They drove in silence, south through the lumbering hills. The sun was high and cool. Mesquite hung dappled shade over the dry grass and Maple trees grew all out of place. Cattleguards and barbed-wire fences came and went until the road writhed up to the top of a low hill surrounded by many bigger ones down near the borders of Bexar and Gillespie counties. The place was called the Alamo Grill. They waited outside on the flatstone porch for a table. The bear sat down on a rickety bench. He stirred an iced tea with a sickly curling claw.

The waiter came out and told them that their table was ready. He sat them at the little two-top by the kitchen. The head of a whitetail looked out from the opposite wall. It was a noisy, terrible place to talk. The bear was ridiculously huge. He tried to rearrange the salt shaker holder and knocked it all over the table. He tore the laminated menu in half. He spilled his water on the roughhewn floor. When he took a deep breath, dust from him rose in a lazy cloud and fell, lit golden by the skylight above them.

The man fiddled with his tea spoon, his folded-over beer cap. He waited to see if the bear would say anything at all. The man ran his fingernails along the blackened groutlines of the tiled tabletop. He tore his napkin into very tiny pieces. The man recognized that this wild world may have no place in it for giving way. No place, perhaps except right here where he sat hoping to be able to hear what rested deep within his father’s heart.