

I TOOK MY TROUBLES FOR A WALK (A GROWN-UP FAIRY TALE)

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What I'm about to tell you happened on an unusually warm, mid-autumn afternoon when I was on a walk in James River State Park in Virginia. I'd just finished a 40 minute hike.

When I arrived and parked the car I chose the river trail. It looked safer there, nearer the road, with the railway at the other side. I thought bears wouldn't like the noise. I'd nearly changed my mind when I saw the warning signs about their presence.

Grass snakes slithered out of my way. I caught the back-end of a ground hog rushing off. There were horse tracks leading to the water's edge, I followed them and came to a wide clearing of rocks and sand. I stayed a while imagining saddled horses drinking long or preparing to cross. Not now, but generations ago, when Frontiers folk would have camped here. Virginians watching wagon trains across the river, dreaming of going further West to the unknown. Their fires at night, warding off coyotes and black bears. Time was moving on so I decided to be brave and see if the scary looking Cabell Trail was a shortcut back to the car.

Dark clouds were forming, an earthy smell hinted at rain. I breathed this all in, giddy as the trees whispered and swayed. Here, it was so simple, I was a pioneer in unfamiliar land, keeping the river to my right. I laughed, spinning round delighted with my navigation skills, as indeed the wooded path brought me back to the safety of my car. I checked my watch reckoning I'd saved 20 minutes.

I got my sandwiches and flask. All the earlier cars were gone. As I settled down to read at a lone picnic table, I heard a noise coming from the trail I'd just left. Fellow hikers maybe. I glanced at the time and carried on eating and reading, lulled by the breeze. I poured a cup of soup.

Everything was perfect. I closed my eyes for a moment or two, inhaling the scent of wood and musk. I grew aware of something in front of me. Quite close. I looked up and froze, cup mid-air. It was the glossiest blue-black fur coat I'd ever seen.

The bear with its head slightly to one side stared back, like an awkward teenager, arms dangling by his side. I fixed on the white 'v' flash on his neck. V for Virginia - at least it's native. I believed this would be my last thought.

I didn't move, just stared. The bear's nostrils flared as the steam of the soup drifted towards him. The bear blinked, and moved forward.

'Carry on' he said politely. 'Don't let me disturb you.'

The trees were still now, the woods held their breath. Very slowly I moved the cup to my mouth, testing myself. Unclenching my teeth I tasted the sourness of fear. I never took my eyes off the now talking bear.

'We don't get to see many humans this close up and eating,' he continued. 'Normally they freeze like you did now, then run or walk away very quickly.'

Maybe I was unconscious, dead even, collapsed on the ground. I couldn't even move my eyes to look for my body.

'I wanted to show you off to my bear-friend, but she's a bit shy.'

'OK' was all I could manage.

'I'm trying to impress her.' he said, leaning towards me across the picnic table. He moved closer as if he wanted to sit down, but wasn't sure.

'I've watched humans from afar, but they tend to be in twos or more and it can be a bit intimidating.'

I wondered if this was someone dressed up, a practical joke. If so, the costume was bloody good.

'I'm sure we must be a bit strange to you.' My head was swimming, either I was going to die, or feel very stupid after this charade played out. Maybe I should play along just in case.

‘So where’s your bear-friend then?’

He turned and gestured towards a wide tree trunk. I knew I was alive as my heart thumped against my ribs. A finer, slightly smaller bear appeared from behind the tree. She waved a shy paw and then came forward.

‘Hello’ she whispered.

‘Hello’ maybe I’d be spared.

‘See, I told you it would be alright.’ The first bear turned to face me again. ‘Where do you live? Up there on the hill?’ He nodded towards the visitors centre.

‘No,’ I said, ‘I live in another country. That’s the visitors centre where humans go to find out about you and the other wildlife in the park.’ This surreal conversation continued.

‘Are we really that scary?’ asked the shy bear-friend from slightly behind the first bear.

‘Well you don’t seem too frightening.’ I set my cup down, before it shook out of my hand.

‘What’s that?’ asked the first bear pointing at my open flask.

‘It’s mushroom - organic.’

‘We snack on mushrooms but I’ve never seen them like that before, can I look?’

‘Of course.’

I thought of my family and friends who would recommend a good therapist. This break was meant to do me good. Maybe there was something in the mushroom soup.

‘Would you mind awfully if I kept this as a souvenir?’

‘Yes of course, be my guest.’ I pushed the flask across the table. Was this really me sounding so calm?

‘It’s just that no one leaves anything behind anymore, we need relics for our museum and there’s a reward for good stuff like this.’

I felt myself returning. The couple edged forward and eventually joined me at that picnic table. We just stared at each other for a while, then they started telling me about their plans. They were looking for a suitable den. Their families didn’t understand modern ways. Bears needed to branch out and move with the times, learn more about humans. By now I was fully involved.

We discussed the coming winter. Which were the best trails in the park. I sought their advice, told them about the purpose of my trip and asked them if I should give up my job and start something new. They weren’t sure, the shier bear-friend suggested I could come and live in the woods for a while, with them. I thought about this for a while. It was getting darker. ‘What’s the best thing to do if you meet a bear unexpectedly?’ I asked. ‘Should you make yourself big by putting your hands up and making a loud noise?’

The two bears fell off the bench in fits of laughter. Big tears rolled down their cheeks. They’d try to stop and then start all over again. They got up and mimicked humans trying to be scary. I laughed with them realising how stupid it must look. It was now early evening and we shared a family packet of crisps. The threatened rain had stayed off. The last birdsong chorus of the day was starting. In the distance I heard a dog bark and caught sight of two figures rounding a bend near the visitors centre.

‘Ok, time for us to skedaddle. Humans are one thing, dogs are another,’ said the first bear. They waved goodbye as they ambled off towards the tall grasses.

I sat in the evening light breathing in the musk and the wood, I packed my rucksack and stretched my stiff limbs. Before heading to my car, I took off my watch and left it on the picnic table, for the bear museum.

Pauline Moore - Freelance radio/podcast producer and journalist, based in Glasgow, from Northern Ireland, likes to write short stories and play with words and ideas. Pauline is the co-host of the Talking Derry Girls Podcast.