

# Casey and the Bear

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*Food*, the bear thought as she ambled beneath the pine forest canopy through thickets of briars and devil's walking sticks. Two days earlier, her winter slumber had been interrupted by a spell of warm weather and a calling need from the recesses of her body where cubs begin to grow. They would be born by spring, but their need for nourishment derived from the fat she had stored was depleting her reserves. It was turning cold again and she needed to replenish quickly. It was hunger that had driven her out into the open and it was the scarcity of winter that prompted her to venture ever closer to the dens where humans lived.

Thoughts of things she could consume flashed through her mind like bolts of lightning in a night sky, followed by a rumble in her stomach that mimicked thunder rolling over the marsh grasses she sometimes roamed.

*Food*, she thought again, the stinging need in her stomach driving her on. *Where is the food? No berries, no leaves, no corn, no fish, frogs or fruit! Where is the food? Acorns, perhaps. Maybe grubs or roots. Yes. Tender shoots of sassafras would be good.*

Recalling a place where trees had been uprooted and turned topsy turvy, she changed direction, oblivious to any danger that might lay ahead. Spotting the black feathered forms of buzzards crowded together on the far side of a road, she crossed the pavement and chased the scavengers away from the carcass of a deer. Though the vultures had been working on the carrion awhile, there was enough meat left for the bear to take a small meal. But it wasn't enough to stop the craving. The promise of tender roots still called, and she resumed her trek toward the fall of trees.

Pausing long enough to drink from a small stream, she crossed another road and came at last to the track for which she had been searching. The terrain was rugged but the reward was satisfying. It took only a moment or two of pawing beneath exposed root balls to find the still-moist offshoots that soon found their way to her stomach. The slugs and grubs sometimes uncovered with the roots were a bonus.

As the urgency of her craving began to subside, the more she became attuned to her surroundings. From the distance came the sounds that humans make when calling to one another, urgent and shrill. Though they seemed to pose no threat yet, she kept a close ear out in case they came closer and continued pawing the dirt. It was the roar of the gun she feared most. But now the dark was closing in and any threat from the humans would be stilled for the night.

Although many forest creatures are blessed with keen sight, the bear is not so fortunate. Like all bears, she relied on her senses of smell and hearing to detect danger. But it was a splash of blue juxtaposed against winter's browns and grays that alerted her that she was not alone. *Food*, she thought at first. But when the familiar scent of human flesh stung the back of her nose, her thoughts changed to *danger* and *flight* and if trapped...*fight!*

Then came the soft, unfamiliar sound of whimpering – a sound she somehow knew conveyed helplessness and despair. Letting go of her fear, she stepped closer to the thing with a blue hide wrapped around its upper torso and saw that it was a small man-cub. Curled into a ball to protect itself from the cold, it shivered and wept, oblivious to her presence just a few feet away.

Realizing that the small human was no threat, she turned to go in search of a place to hunker down against the night's cold, then stopped. The changes taking place within her body triggered an instinct that fought against her need to continue foraging. The man-cub might not survive the night without her help. Her instinct to protect the young was strong, stronger than her need for food. She turned back toward the human and with the practiced gentleness of a mother bruin used to caring for her cubs, she settled in around the man-cub for the night.

Soon after dawn, the bear heard the shouts of humans from far away. "KAY-SEE! KAY-SEE! Where are you, KAY-SEE!" As the sun began to warm the air the shouts became more insistent. They seemed to come from different directions, sometimes from many directions at once, but never did the shouts come close enough that she felt the need to run. In all the years she had been alive, she had never seen the humans do this, and she didn't know what to make of it.

Feeling the call of hunger again, the bear left the boy to resume digging and eating the roots and grubs. But she never strayed too far from the man-cub, sometimes stopping to watch him as he struggled to traverse the rugged terrain. Though he sometimes fought his way over fallen trees and through dense underbrush, he made little progress and changed directions so many times he often ended up where he started. And all the while the calls continued. “KAY-SEE! KAY-SEE!”

Sometimes the calls were drowned out by the big machines that beat the air overhead followed by the smaller machines that whirled along as if they were its offspring. Then came the smell of dogs. She hated dogs and the urge to retreat was overwhelming. But the man-child had begun to make noises of abandonment again, so she held fast. Her instinct to protect was strong.

As the second night began to fall, the bear ceased her foraging and came to where the boy had settled. He appeared safe and was too exhausted to be afraid. The day had been warm and she sensed that it would be a mild night. But she also smelled a coming rain and wondered how a cub with no fur would fare against a storm. Again, she settled down around him and he soon fell asleep.

It started to rain long before the dawn. A sprinkle at first, then much harder. The bear knew she could save herself discomfort if she crawled under a tree fall or pressed against a berm. She felt the man-cub’s heart beating strong against the protective foreleg she had draped over him and dismissed such thoughts. She was warm enough beneath her winter’s layer of fat and her fur shed the rain well enough. The boy would not fare so well if she left.

Dawn broke late, delayed by the thick dark clouds that released sheets of rain. The wind blew harder than the day before, buffeting away any distant sounds. If the humans who had gathered the past two days and come together again, she could not hear them. She did not know what that meant, but it didn’t matter. Her stomach’s call to be filled still spoke to her, demanding that she resume her search for food. She resumed foraging as she had the day before, always keeping a watchful eye on the boy.

By noon, the rain ceased falling, the sun came out, and the wind slacked off enough that the bear began to hear the yells for “KAY-SEE” again. Hearing the calls as well, the boy stirred from his spot beneath the brush and started moving toward the calls. But the terrain was rugged, filled with sinkholes full of water and thick underbrush. Weaker than the day before, he struggled to make his way around watery hazards and through dense thickets. By nightfall the boy had

become so hopelessly ensnared in a tangle of briars and vines he could no longer move. Just a few feet beyond the boy the bear could sometimes hear the sound made by the machines that rolled over roads. She didn't try to move any closer for fear a human might see her, yet she remained close enough to see that no harm came to the boy. Even when two dogs in the company of a human passed by on the road she remained in place, still and silent. It confused her that the dogs were led back down the road though it was clear they heard the boy calling out, crying.

And then they came. First one man, who untangled the boy from the briars, then more. And soon the they were all gone, taking the boy covered in the blue hide with them. Rising from her cover at last, she turned and ambled back into the forest. The cold was returning and her belly was full. It was time to return to her den and sleep, for soon she would have cubs of her own to watch over.

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