

THE SAWDUST BEAR

By Robin Moore

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BACK IN the 1920s, thirty years before I was born, our part of Pennsylvania was a haven for black bears. They made their homes in the rocky crags of the mountains that surrounded our valley. Every now and then people would see bear tracks in the mud along the streams. Sometimes they would even see the bears in broad daylight, foraging for food.

Then one year, late in the fall, when my grandfather was barely twenty years old, he shot one of the biggest black bears ever taken in the Pennsylvania mountains. He didn't mean to shoot him. It was an accident. Grandpa had been out deer hunting with his old flintlock rifle when he stumbled across a black bear.

The bear charged; my grandfather fired.

The bear fell dead.

It took five men to drag the shaggy black carcass down out of the woods. People came from all over to see it. Bears are so elusive that, even in those days, there were many people in our town who had never seen one up close. The men spent the rest of the day skinning and butchering, doing a real careful job.

Herman Hemsley, one of the men who helped with the skinning, was a part-time taxidermist. He said he would stuff that bear for my grandfather so Grandpa could always remember his close brush with death.

My grandfather agreed. He could picture how magnificent that bear would look standing by the fireplace in the living room, its blue-black fur burnished by the firelight.

It took Herman three months, working evenings and weekends, to get that bear stuffed and mounted.

First he built a sturdy frame from stiff wire. Then he added contours by wrapping the frame with strips of cloth, layered with wood shavings and sawdust. Once the form

was complete, he sewed the huge skin over it and added teeth, claws, and glass eyeballs. Then he mounted the whole thing on a heavy base made from solid oak.

I guess Herman wanted the bear to look fierce. So he stood him up on his hind legs, his mouth forever open in a silent roar, his paws extended in a threatening gesture. Everyone agreed it was Herman's masterpiece, the highest form of the taxidermist's art.

One day, early in spring, a bunch of men loaded the bear into the back of my grandfather's pickup truck and drove it over to the house. This was back when the brick house was new. He and my grandmother had gotten married the year before and were just beginning to settle into the routine of life together.

When my grandmother saw the truck pull up, she came out onto the front porch and stood with her hands on her hips.

"I hope you're not thinking of bringing that thing into the house," she said.

Grandpa was momentarily stunned. "What are you talking about? Of course it's going in the house, right there by the fireplace in the living room."

My grandmother shook her head. "Oh, no, it's not," she said emphatically. "I'm not spending the next forty years sweeping up bear hair and dusting cobwebs off that thing!"

Grandpa threw his hands up in the air. "Well, where do you expect me to put it?"

My grandmother pointed to the shed behind the house, where my grandfather had his workshop. "Put it back there," she said.

"What? Have you lost your senses?" my grandfather shouted.

Herman spoke up, trying to reason with my grandma. "We can't put it in the shed," he explained. "This is a fine piece of taxidermy. It's gotta be stored under optimal conditions. If we put it out there, the fleas will lay their eggs in the bear's fur, the rats'll chew on his feet, and the field mice'll make nests in his ears!"

My grandmother planted her feet and crossed her arms across her chest. "You men can talk all you want. That bear is not coming in this house."

Still, my grandfather was determined. Ignoring my grandma, he made the men unload the bear and carry it up the front steps and onto the porch.

But the shaggy beast wouldn't fit through the front door. And as Grandma pointed out, he wouldn't stand up in the living room either; the ceiling was too low.

So, in the end, they followed my grandmother's wishes. They carried the bear out to the shed and placed him in the corner of my grandfather's workshop, where he stood on his hind legs for thirty years, until I came along.

Herman Hemsley was right. The shed wasn't a very good place to store the sawdust bear. The fleas ate at him until his ears grew bare and his hair fell off in big clumps. The mice nibbled on his feet, and squirrels bored in through his ear holes and stored nuts in him for the winter.

But I loved the sawdust bear. To me he was always immense, powerful, and full of strange magic. I was never afraid of him, like the other kids were. It's true, his posture was threatening, his claws were massive and wickedly sharp, his teeth looked powerful and dangerous. But the one thing the taxidermist couldn't change was the expression on the bear's face. He never looked fierce to me. Instead he looked kind of puzzled and maybe a little sad. Those glass eyeballs gave his gaze a faraway look. From where that great bear stood, he could look out the window over my grandfather's workbench. His gaze always seemed to be fixed on something beyond the cornfields and the pumpkin patches, up in the mountains where he had come from so long ago.

Many times I wondered if the sawdust bear felt confined in the workshop, away from the sunlight and the wind and the smells of the open air. But a secret part of me was glad that he was there, always waiting for me when I came to visit.

Then one day, when I was about ten years old, a strange thing happened.

It started innocently enough. My grandfather and I were out in the shed. It was a brisk winter's day and Gramps had a crackling fire going in the wood stove. He was sitting on his stool at the workbench, rewiring a toaster for my grandmother. I was poking around in the back of the shed, going through an old chest of drawers.

I opened a small wooden drawer. There, in the weak light, I could make out a pile of strange objects. They were made of pieces of wood and hollowed-out bones, tied together with scraps of leather and twine.

"Grandpa," I said, "what are these?"

My grandfather put down his tools and came over to see what I'd found.

He smiled. “Why, Robin, I forgot I still had those. They’ve probably been sitting in this drawer for thirty years.”

“What are they?”

“Well, they’re animal calls. This one’s a mallard duck call. And this one here is a turkey call, for spring gobbler season. And this”—he held up a strange-looking thing made from a hollowed-out deer antler with a piece of birch bark threaded through it—”this is a female bear grunt call.”

“What’s it for?”

“For hunting bear! You blow in the end of it and it imitates the sound of a female bear grunting in the mating season. That way, it calls the male right to you.”

“When is the bear mating season?”

“Well, Robin, it’s just about now. For the next month or so, those females will be calling to the males. Of course, there aren’t nearly as many bears as there were back in the old days, so it’s harder and harder for the bears to find a mate.”

“How about that female we saw in the woods last summer? Would she be making calls like this?”

“Well, sure, I guess so.”

“Grandpa! Let’s use this call to go up in the woods and find some bears.”

My grandfather shook his head. “No, Robin, that’d be way too dangerous. You shouldn’t be messing with the bears during mating season. They can get real ornery this time of year. Now let’s put these things away and forget we ever talked about it.”

Sadly I placed the animal calls back in the drawer and slid it closed.

But I just couldn’t get the thought of that female bear grunt call out of my mind. I had to hear what it sounded like and, more important, I had to see if it really worked.

In the days that followed, I hatched a plan. I would take the call and sneak into the woods, making my way up the mountainside to a clearing where, the summer before, we’d seen a black bear and her cub. To be safe, I would climb a tree. Then, with all the proper precautions made, I would blow the call and wait to see what would happen.

A dozen times I almost told my grandfather, hoping that he would join me in my adventure. Deep inside I suspected that he was as curious as I was but was afraid of what my grandmother might say if she found out that we had snuck out to spend time with the bears.

So the next Saturday morning, when no one else was up, I crept out to my grandfather's workshop, slipped the call into my pocket, and headed for the mountainside. In a half hour I was up a tree at the edge of the clearing, with the call pressed to my lips.

I blew softly at first, not knowing what kind of noise it would make. What came out was a pretty impressive grunting sound. I blew again, harder this time.

All the while I had my eyes on the clearing, hoping to catch a glimpse of a black bear.

It didn't take me long to learn the nuances of that bear call. I discovered that if I buzzed my lips as I blew, I could create an interesting tremolo effect. Before long I was giving a little concert of bear grunts from my perch in the tree.

As the calls became louder, they echoed off the sides of the mountain. The sound seemed to fill the woods, ricocheting across the hills and drifting down into the valley.

At last, I saw a bear approaching. A big male lumbered into the clearing on all fours, his nose held high. I grew a little afraid and stopped blowing calls. I just sat in the crook of the tree limb and watched him.

After a few moments my fear subsided. But I was still in awe of the tremendous power that rippled under the bear's shaggy coat as he moved about the clearing.

Fascinated, I leaned out farther and farther onto the branch, not realizing what I was doing. All that mattered to me was that I get a good look at that bear.

It was while I was straining to keep him in view that I heard a sharp crack. The branch had given way beneath me! I dropped fifteen feet and landed in a pile of soft leaves.

I wasn't hurt, but the sound of the falling branch had alerted the bear. He turned and looked at me for what seemed like a very long time. He wrinkled his brow as if he was trying to figure out who I was.

At that moment I was genuinely afraid, and sorry that I had done such a stupid thing.

The bear surveyed me for a long time. I held as still as I could, pretending to be a tree stump. The bear dropped on all fours and casually walked to me. When he was within a few feet he stopped and sniffed me. His black nostrils were less than a yard

from my face. The moisture from his breath formed a cloud that drifted in my direction, bringing me his terrifying animal scent.

I braced myself for the swipe of a razor-sharp paw, or the headlong charge that I knew could come at any instant.

But it did not come.

Instead the bear rumbled deep in his chest, making a great groaning growl that seemed to shake the earth underneath me. Then he turned and was gone, loping heavily up the mountainside and into the cover of the trees.

I waited until I could no longer hear the sound of his paws on the leafy trail. Then I pulled myself to my feet and ran back to the house on shaky legs. I had been terrified, and I knew that what I had done was stupendously foolish. But what an adventure! I had called up a wild black bear, come face to face with the brute, and lived to tell the tale!

But as I neared my grandfather's house, I realized that I couldn't tell the tale. Who would I tell? My grandfather would be mad at me for disobeying. My grandmother would be furious at me for risking my life. My friends would never believe me.

This was the bittersweet irony of it: I had had a great adventure and I couldn't tell anyone about it! I decided that I would slip into the workshop, put the call into its drawer, and never mention anything to anyone.

But when I got down to the workshop, I noticed something strange. The shed door was standing wide open. I knew I had closed it when I left, and my grandfather would never leave it open.

"Maybe it was the wind," I said to myself. I stepped inside and swung the door closed behind me.

But when I looked into the half-darkness of the shed, I couldn't believe what I saw. The sawdust bear was gone!

In the corner where the bear used to stand, nothing remained but the heavy wooden base-and a double trail of sawdust going out the door and up toward the mountainside.

Then I realized what had happened. That female bear grunt call had been so effective it had even rekindled the passions of a bear that had been stuffed for thirty

years! The sawdust bear was out roaming the mountainside, looking for a mate. No wonder he hadn't been interested in me.

Now there was no way out of it. Later that morning I told my grandfather the whole story.

He couldn't believe it at first. I took him out to the workshop and showed him the sawdust trail, but he was still doubtful. Even after we tracked the bear a ways up into the hills, Grandpa found my story hard to believe.

Then, a few days later, one of the workers down at the local sawmill told Grandpa and me that he had spotted a large black bear prowling around the sawdust piles.

"It was the strangest thing," the man said. "That bear sat down on his haunches and began using his paws to shovel sawdust into his mouth. A sawdust-eating bear. I've never seen anything like it!"

My grandfather and I looked at each other. We knew what was happening. The bear was just swallowing a little extra sawdust to make up for the stuffing he had lost during his dash to freedom.

I like to think the bear did find his freedom. I like to think that he made it up into the mountains, to that place he had been looking at through the window for all those years. I'd like to think that he heard the grunt of a real female bear and that he found a mate and lived out his life in peace and safety, as a bear should.

My grandfather and I never told anybody what really happened to the sawdust bear. We said we had hauled him out to the town dump and thrown him down a sinkhole with a bunch of other things that no one wanted anymore: old washing machines and broken bicycles and cardboard boxes.

But I like to think that's he still up in the mountains, somewhere. And if he is, I hope we never find him.