

Janice Daugharty
Route one
Stockton, Ga. 31649
(912) 242-5917

original draft

Tippy and the Preacher

Sprinting, elbows pumping, the preacher made it to the end of the bridge, a flat-faced semi bearing down on him. VR-ROOM! Thighs together, he hopped to the grassed shoulder and clutched the Suwannee River sign post, calling back at his little red dog. His florid face was jugged, his bloodless mouth pursed and futilely bleating. The sounds were absorbed by the roaring of the truck, the rear wheels gusting a hot breath of gravel and the brakes cutting the wind with a horrid hiss, traveling south.

Finding himself separated from his master, the short-legged pooch had scrambled onto the lower ledge of the concrete bridge and now chased in the wake of the semi, oblivious to the call of the fat, bald preacher. The racket of the truck began to fade at the Fargo City Limits sign, leaving a trail of vibrations to blip the preacher's shouts.

"Here, Tippy!" he called. "And mind out." That said, after the fact, the preacher, keeping to the scorched grass shoulder, resumed his brisk pace, breathing hard, with the dog on the heels of his spatula-soled tennis shoes. The dog's tongue hung like a slip of raw liver, partially swallowed.

Checking left to right for traffic, the preacher, still huffing, crossed the hot acrid black-top to a triangular dirt plot where a county road intersected with the state highway. On the plot of dirt, laced with gravel and glops of motor oil, sat a square cinder block service station. Towering above the low mint green building was a leaning square sign advertising the prices of gasoline: UNLEADED 9__, REGULAR 9__. Prices changing as they did, the owner despaired of keeping the digits current.

A panorama of other signs plastered the walls where a wrap-a-round beach mural of palms and pink hot rods clashed with the surrounding pine woods. A nick in the woods of southeast Georgia, the land ran flat to the Georgia-Florida line, a nebulous division, where the peaks of tall long-leaf yellow pines stamped their faces on the bleached August sky. A languorous mix of insect hums and clicks drifted from the woods on swells of winey air to the hot and sour dirt plot. A breathless zone.

The preacher, puffing evenly, marched between two of the three loaded pulpwood trucks, parked at odd angles before the store front. His tiny dog padded after him. Tall domes of uniformly stacked pine poles, yellow raw ends projecting from all sides of the truck beds, released a scent of sharp hot pine tar, at odds with another wild odor. Prancing along, the dog raised the hackles on his back.

"Mind out for the bear, Tippy," warned the preacher, mincing across a bed of loose gravel.

In the slant of late-evening sunlight, a big black

bear revolved monotonously in a circle.

Tippy, trailing the preacher, glanced benignly at the bear and skirted a curve of the round.

The bear, sun-bleached glints in his thick black coat, ignored the dog and continued his everlasting pacing in the circular trough situated between the pulpwood trucks and the tip of the triangle. The triangle tip was blunted by tracks of shot-cutting traffic. On the thick furry neck of the bear, a wide rusty collar revealed bright worms of welded metal. A rusty logging chain was attached from the collar to an iron stake driven in the center of a three-foot circumference. The swath of dirt from the trench to the jagged-tipped stake had been swept clean of tracks by the drag of the chain, stretched tight and creaking at the stake, at angry discord with the bright chirping of the frogs in the nearby swamp.

Now and then, a car or truck passed, flapping the plywood sign which stood barely clear of the perfectly carved circle of the bear. The square brown sign, rotting at the edges and fading, had been spray painted with the same mint green of the service station walls. It read: REAL LIVE OKEEFENOKEE BEAR - LOOK OUT!

The bear paced wearily, mechanically, black eyes brooding, head drooped, breathing hot and primal. The chain evoked an image of a single hand on a clock; the circle, the face of a clock; the rhythm of the creaking, time measuring off...

A tall rangy man in work khakis swung out the screen door of the service station and spat a toothpick to the gray powdery dirt. Strolling toward his truck, parked between

two others and just beyond the reach of the bear, the man tossed an empty Tom's Peanuts cellophane packet into the bear's trench and laughed as the bear sniffed it in passing...still pacing, chain creaking. Its large paws, skimming the dry dirt, lifted heavily but synchronously in his plodding. His straight back had begun to sag.

"Y'all forgot to water that damned bear," hollered a man from inside.

"You water him if you want him watered, Bo," a female voice called back. The threatening tilt of her voice, hesitant.

The pulpwood truck ground and shrieked, then spun out with a popping clatter and wobble onto the highway. Dust whorled above and sifted down, a hazy brown in layering bands, on the circle where the bear paced.

"You better watch yourself, woman!" Bo warned. He laughed and the laughter of another man joined the sound, salty and crawling.

The cap of a soft drink bottle popped.

The radio, a nascent background drone, suddenly blared a county tune:

I didn't know God made hon-ky tonk an-gels;
I might of known that you'd ne-ver make a wife.
I gave hup the on-ly one that ever loved me
and went back to the wi-ld side of life.

As abruptly, the blaring cut. A baby bawled continuously.

"Now look what you done, woke the baby," said Bo.

"Me?" said his wife, her whine piercing the small room.

"And who was it caused it, bossing me around?"

"You want them few snaggles you got left in your head, you better get out there and water that bear!" Bo said, the threat blending with baby's bawling.

The other man laughed uncertainly.

"Go on, hit me!" said Bo's wife. "I double-dog dare you!"

"Ain't it hot?" said the uncertain man, wandering to the door, peering out.

"I'll water him, Ma," said a young voice, flat and edgy.

"Don't you get close, son!" she said, words rapid-fire, following her vapid drawl. "You know how he gets when it's hot." Her run-on tone resumed: lethargic and wasted. "Bo, how come you to bring that bear back from the swamp I don't know," she said.

"Draws business," said Bo.

"Business, shit!" she said. "WHAT business?"

"You got you a new house trailer, don't you?" Bo shot back.

The husky ten-year old boy bumbled through the rickety screen door in a swarm of houseflies. In a bracket of stubby arms he carried a chipped enamel pan of sloshing water, braced against his dimpled white stomach, his stiff new blue jeans riding low on the waist, rolled cuffs scraping on the dirt. He shuffled forward, black inchoate eyes set in an expressionless pale square face, black straight hair swept forward into bangs.

Stopping just off the circle where the bear paced, he stooped, grunting, and placed the pan of water on the dirt. With a long forked stick, he pushed the pan into the trench, backing quickly as the bear came round. The bear plodded around the pan, and

on, circling.

"He ain't thirsty, Ma," the boy called, staring curiously at the bear.

"That's his problem," she hollered.

"That's a right handy boy y'all got there," said the man at the door.

"REAL handy!" said Bo. "Sets on his lazy backend..."

"Now, don't you start in on him," the woman said.

"Yeah," said Bo, gaining volume, "you raised you some fine younguns: one on the chain gang and the other'un..."

"Shut up!" the woman hollered. Something fell. The baby screamed. Bo's and his wife's words tangled, locked. The chain creaked, an even grating sound.

The boy flung the brittle stick at the bear. It landed on the bear's dull black coat and bounced off with a soft thud. The bear kept circling, imperviously, the chain stretched from the stake, the circle growing by centimeters.

"Here, Tippi!" called the preacher, whistling twice as he came back and cut along the triangle again: right, march; right, march. The little dog, broad across its russet back, followed closely with its short legs scissoring on the scorching dirt.

"Evening, young man," said the preacher, cutting across the tip of the triangle. The solid padding of his feet contrasted with the thin keening of the locusts.

The bear, circling, drew level with the dog, snorted, and the dog glanced at him, hackles raised, continuing to trail the preacher. The bear plodded on, his dead-to-craving eyes downcast.

The boy slid his hands into his pockets and swayed as he turned to watch the preacher and his dog fade into the dusk and vanish along the wooded flat end of the triangle behind the store.

"Better drink, boy," the boy said softly, watching the bear coming up on the curve where he stood.

Momentarily, the locusts seemed to thicken and draw a curtain of ringing between the bear's plot and the service station. The dull black eyes of the bear scoured the dirt as it sluggishly circled again, chain creaking.

"Y'all ever seen anything to beat that?" the man at the door said.

"Knock that fly off the baby, Bo, for Christ's sake!" said the woman. "To beat what?"

"That new preacher," said the man. "Out walking like that ever evening? And in this heat."

"Heart trouble, they say," said Bo.

"Fat," contributed the wife.

"Y'all been to hear him yet?" asked the man.

"Nope," said the woman. "You?"

"Not if I can help it," said the man and laughed weakly.

"If he preaches like he walks, he oughta be a good'un,"

said Bo, laughing.

"A little preaching wouldn't hurt YOU," said his wife.

"Look at the pot calling the kettle black," said Bo.

"Go to hell!"

The boy watched the bear begin to blend in the gray twilight,

shadowlike. And he could smell him, a sharp wild musk, sharper and wilder on rainy days. He watched the cloud-like shadow of the bear revolving.

The frogs' chirping grew shrill and sank. Rose again. Shrank again. The baby's crying was consistent now: too tired to go on, too miserable to quit. And oddly the woman began singing, "Someday, you gonna miss me baby," trailing off... The boy recognized the threat. So did Bo.

"Shit, I wish!" Bo said.

The man laughed.

At the beginning of summer Bo and them brought the bear home from the swamp: his front and rear paws paired and roped with rough dirty hemp. His dark fur bright and electric. It had been a fine thing then, owning a bear. Now, the boy often thought he could no longer stand the circling, creaking. But he never showed it, never said it, only watched, listened... A practice made pure over time.

He had even felt proud, watching the bear rear and claw at the air, teeth glaring white and sharp. The way the other boys from school came to toss peanuts at him and watch him rear, man-like, on his hind legs. People - strangers - would stop by, even if they bought no gasoline, to stand off at a distance and shudder at the mere size of him, guessing at his weight, his disposition. Lots of Bo's drinking buddies came by to throw gravel at him, peppering his plush coat. The bear had seemed to the boy worth more than himself when they first got him. Now, the bear was practically worthless. He hated him being tied up and hated him for putting up with it, hated the way his plaintive eyes had quit

roaming over the woods. He'd become inferior and sour.

The boy could taste the feeling and it told so much about himself, about Bo. You couldn't depend on anybody, nothing was steady. Even his mama didn't really care: the boy and the baby, like the bear, were something handy to quarrel over. And Bo didn't bother even to use him anymore.

Yesterday, he had offered to climb the ladder to the leaning gas-price sign and bring to date the current price per gallon. Bo had laughed at him in front of two of his buddies - Bo's buddies.

The boy had no buddies; he planned to run away, like his older brother, and never made the effort to collect buddies. Lately, he wondered if he could make it out there. He looked into the dark recesses of the woods and thought of his brother there, not, as Bo said, on the chain gang.

When the boy had been little and cute, Bo used to call him "Rooster." Then, all of his buddies, dropping by, would give the chubby toddler sips of their beer until he grew woozy. Eyes crossed, the boy would be stood on the long whittled-edged counter and loosed to wander it, end to end, while they would laugh and grab at him, weaving and sick, just before he landed on the floor.

Now, Bo simply called him "boy": a general tag, implicit and loathsome. When they'd gone to fish on Billy's Island in the Okeefenokee Swamp and brought home the bear, Bo hadn't asked the boy to go - not that he wanted to. He'd been before and shook

while the gators nosed to the boat, bubble eyes shining in the men's head lights, the murky black water feeding back the hazy beams; snakes all around, switching in the water, hanging from the moss-draped, bell-bottomed cypresses; the dark thick, the night long, cold, penetrating. Regardless how the boy tried to appear unafraid, they always knew. And the real danger, the boy soon learned, was within the boat.

He knew them well enough to know the story of the struggle with the bear - his weakness, their strength; his strength, their weakness - lacked truth. They had to make the bear sound strong enough to make them appear stronger, weak enough for them to have plausibly handled and hog-tied him, later boasting how one at a time had taken him on, "tusseling," got attached and brought him home. They were drunk when they got there.

The boy could hear them: the tailgate of the truck clanking, the bear snorting, its fur sliding on the metal floor, its tremendous body quaking the earth between the soot-reeking shanty and the service station. Parting the rotting curtains on the window above his bed, the boy had seen the heap of bear fur in the headlights.

None of them was scared - or they appeared not to be - with the strands of hemp crippling the bear. He repeatedly worked his unweildy undulating body along the dirt, his four useless legs functioning as two - he couldn't stand. He grunted, snorted and roared. And with each roar, the men would back away and curse, "Son-of-a-bitch!" Drawing nearer as he tired. They'd had to muzzle him to weld the collar on his neck; nervously, two at a

time kneeling on the bear's side and pressing the white sparkling torch to his neck, then jerking back as the bear jerked.

None of them admitted to being afraid. The boy had watched and shook in his bed, afraid of their hidden fear, because if THEY could be afraid, he was without hope. Later, the bear's stubborn fierceness gave the boy hope. The bear's impotence now transferred to the boy like a tiny blue tattoo from a bubble-gum pack, licked and stamped on his heart.

He watched the bear. It wouldn't even drink water. And Bo had declared he'd never give him another possum or coon from the traps in the woods out back if the bear wouldn't cut up. Over the summer months, the boy had watched the bear gradually shrink, though his heavy coat made him appear fat, cub-like, but ancient and drab.

"Come on, Tippi," the preacher called, huffing as he cut across the tip of the triangle.

The dog again barely skirted the trench of the circle, the bear approaching, drab eyes nabbing patches of last light.

The boy jerked his hands from his pockets and stood straight, watching the bear with interest. He thought he detected a faint gleam of fierceness in the eyes: squiggles of light in black holes of swimming oil.

The bear trotted, kicking up dust, approaching the spot where the dog had stopped. The bear reared and yanked the chain, a menacing clanking. The collar clicked. The dog yelped. The preacher, cutting between the two pulpwood trucks, glanced back, his face a study. The boy gasped. The chain snapped at the

collar. And the bear scuttled off behind the dog, snorting. The dog chased the preacher, who was now racing between trucks.

"Tippy? Tippy!" the preacher yelled.

The dog was on his heels, yipping.

"Tippy, get!" the preacher yelled, pumping hard, his face bright hot and distorted.

The bear, snorting wildly, approached, two feet behind the dog, as the dog cut with the preacher between the trucks.

"Tippy, we're on our own now," the preacher said and flung open one of the truck doors, vanishing inside and slamming it fast.

The dog, yipping, darted beneath the truck and the bear rambled on confusedly, then lumbered across the highway and into the woods.

"You're on your own now," the boy said, mesmerized as he watched the dusk close over the woods.

the end