

Tippy and the Preacher

Sprinting, elbows pumping, the preacher made it to the end of the bridge, a butt-nosed semi bearing down on him. VR-ROOM! He hopped to the grassed shoulder and clutched the Suwannee River sign post, calling back at his little red dog. His florid face was juttred, his ~~eyes~~^{PALE} mouth pursed and futilely ~~bleating~~^{BLEATING}, all sound absorbed by the truck's roar, a gust of gravel, and brakes hissing out.

The short-legged pooch, finding himself separated from his master, had scrambled onto the lower ledge of the 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, the preacher, keeping to the scorched grass shoulder, resumed his 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.

Checking left to right for traffic, the preacher crossed the glittering black-top to a triangular dirt plot where the road intersected with another. A concrete block filling station sat on the island beneath a tall, leaning sign advertising gasoline: UNLEADED 9 ~~9~~, REGULAR 9 ~~9~~. Prices changing so, Bo, the owner, had despaired of keeping the digits current.

A beach mural of palms and pink hot rods wrapped around the squat building, and on each side the woods ran deep and flat to the Georgia-Florida line, a nebulous division, where the peaks of long-leaf pines stamped 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.

The preacher, puffing evenly, marched between two of the three loaded pulpwood trucks, parked before the store front. The tiny dog padded after him. Tall domes of uniformly stacked pine poles, raw yellow ends projecting from the truck beds, released a scent of 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 sun, a big black bear revolved monotonously.

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

The bear, sun-bleached glints in its thick black coat, ignored the dog and continued an everlasting pacing in the circular trough, between the pulpwood trucks and the tip of the

triangle. The triangle tip was blunted by tracks of short-cutting traffic. On the thick furry neck of the bear, a wide rusty collar revealed bright worms of metal weld. 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 angry discord with the frogs bright chirping in the nearby swamp.

Now and then, a car or truck passed, flapping the plywood sign that 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 filling station walls. It read: REAL LIVE OKE ~~FENOKE~~ 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 and spat a toothpick to the gray powdery dirt. Strolling toward his truck, parked between two others and just beyond the bear's reach, the man tossed an empty peanut pack into the 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. Its straight back had begun to sag.

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

"You water him if you want him watered, ~~Bo~~." The threatening tilt of the female voice was 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 on the circle where the bear paced.

"You better watch yourself, woman!" Bo warned. He laughed and another man joined in, salty and crawling.

The cap of a soft drink bottle popped.

The radio, a nascent background drone, suddenly blared a country 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 whose fault was 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's threat blended with the baby's bawling.

The other man laughed uncertainly.

"Go on, pop me!" said Bo's wife. "I double-dog dare you!"
"Ain't it hot?" The uncertain man wandered to the door, peered out.

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

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

"Draws business."

"Business ~~shit~~^{HECK}! WHAT business?"

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

The husky ten-year-old boy bumbled through the screen door in a swarm of houseflies. In a bracket of stubby arms he carried a chipped enamel pan of water, braced against his white dimpled stomach, his stiff new blue jeans riding low on the waist, rolled cuffs scraping the dirt. He shuffled forward, black inchoate eyes set in a 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," called the boy, 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.

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

"Here, Tippy!" The preacher whistled 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, its short legs scissoring on the scorching dirt.

"Evening, young man." The preacher spoke, then cut across the tip of the triangle. The solid padding of his feet contrasted with the keening of locusts.

The bear, circling, drew level with the dog, snorted; the dog glanced at him, hackles raised, and continued to trail the preacher. The bear plodded on, ^{ITS} ~~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 at the flat wooded end of the triangle behind the store.

"Better drink, fella." The boy spoke softly, watching the bear come 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 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.

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

"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." Bo laughed.

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

"Look at the pot calling the kettle black," said Bo. "GO TO HELL!"

~~Bo said to the woman~~
The boy watched the bear begin to blend in the gray twilight, shadow-like. And he could smell him, a sharp, wild musk, sharper and wilder on rainy days. He watched the cloud-like shadow of the bear revolve.

The frogs' chirping grew shrill and sank. Rose again. Sank again. The baby's crying was consistent now: too tired to go on, too miserable to quit. And queerly the woman began

singing, "Someday, you gonna miss me baby," trailing off... The boy recognized the threat. So did Bo.

^{SHOOT}
~~Shit~~, I wish!" Bo said.

The man laughed.

~~At the beginning of summer, Bo and them brought the bear home from the swamp, its front and rear paws paired and roped with rough hemp. Its dark fur bright and electric. Owning the bear had been a fine thing then. Now, the boy often thought he could no longer stand the circling and creaking. But he never showed it, never said anything, 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 and watch it rear, man-like, on hind legs. People - strangers - would stop by, even if they bought no gasoline, to stand back a safe distance and shudder at the mere size, guessing at its weight and disposition. Lots of Bo's drinking buddies came by to throw gravel, peppering the plush coat. The bear had seemed to the boy worth more than himself at first. Now, the bear was practically worthless. He hated the drab animal for putting up with being tied, hated the way its plaintive eyes had quit roving over the woods. It had become inferior and sour.

The boy could taste the feeling, which told so much about himself, about Bo. You couldn't depend on anybody, nothing was steady. Even his mama, owned by Bo, 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 the boy anymore.

Yesterday, he'd 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 any effort to collect buddies. Lately, he wondered whether 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 beer until he grew woozy. Eyes crossed, the boy would be stood on the long whittled counter and loosed to wander, end to end, while they laughed and grabbed 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 all gone to fish on Billy's Island in the Okefenokee 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 gators nosed to the boat, bubble eyes shining in the men's head lights, murky black water feeding back the hazy beams; snakes all around, switching in the water, hanging from the moss-draped 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 - its weakness, their strength; its strength, their weakness - lacked truth. They had to make the bear sound strong enough to make themselves appear stronger, weak enough for them to have plausibly handled and hog-tied it, later boasting how one at a time had taken the big bear on, "tusling," got attached and brought it 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 station. Parting the rotting curtains on the window above his bed, the boy saw 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. It repeatedly worked its unwieldy, undulating body along the dirt, its four useless legs functioning as two - it couldn't stand. It grunted, snorted and roared. And with each roar, the men would back up and cuss - "Son ^{OF A BITCH} ~~OF A BITCH~~ drawing nearer as it tired. They'd had to muzzle the bear to weld the collar on its neck; nervously, two at a time kneeling on the bear's side and pressing the white sparkling torch to its 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 fear, because if ^{Bo} Buck and his buddies 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 blue bubble gum tattoo on his heart.

He watched the bear. It wouldn't even drink water. And Bo had declared he'd never give it another possum or coon from the traps out back if it didn't cut up. Over the summer, the boy had watched the bear gradually shrink, though its heavy coat made it appear fat, cut-like, ^{WATTLE} ~~fat~~ ancient and drab.

"Come on, Tippy," the preacher called, puffing as he cut across the tip of the triangle.

~~The dog~~ The dog again barely skirted 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 oil.

The bear trotted, kicking up dust, approaching the spot where ~~the dog~~ the dog had stopped, then reared and yanked the chain, a menacing clank. The collar clicked. The dog yelped. The preacher, cutting between the two pulpwood trucks, glanced back, his face a study of alarm. The boy gasped. The chain snapped at the collar, and the bear scuttled off behind the dog, snorting. The dog chased the preacher, who now raced between trucks.

"Tippy?" the preacher yelled. "Tippy!"

The dog yipped at his heels.

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

The dog, yipping, darted beneath the truck, and the bear
rambled on confusedly, then lumbered off across the road.

"We're on our own now," said the boy, mesmerized as he
watched dusk ~~close~~ close over the woods.

the end

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.

^{We're} ^{OUR}
"You're on your own now," the boy repeated, mesmerized as he watched the dusk close over the woods.

the end

Tippy & Preacher

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