

# THE BEAR WENT OVER THE MOUNTAIN

William Kotzwinkle



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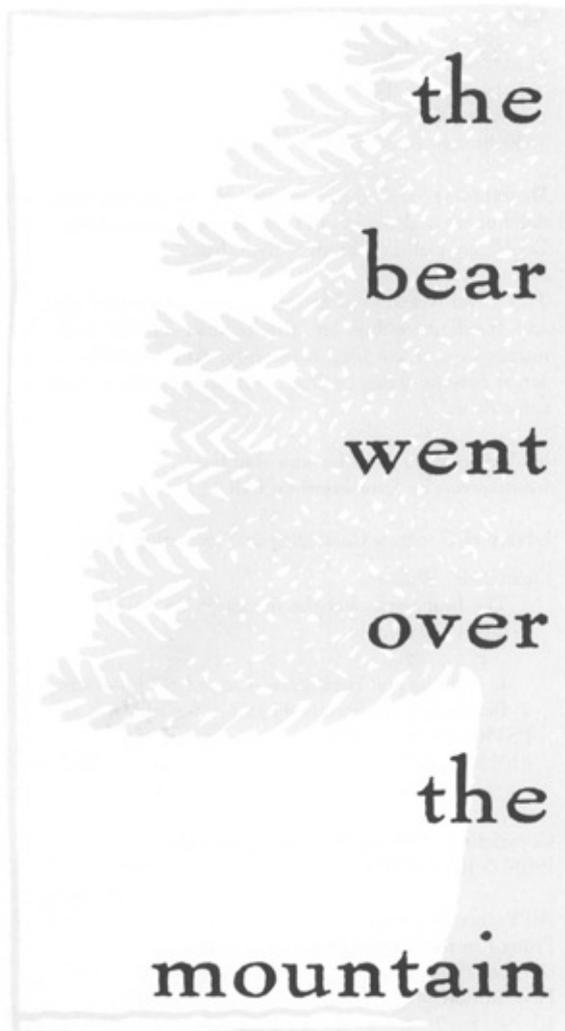
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**frontispiece by kate brennan hall**

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**with thanks to bronson platner**

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~~The bear went over the mountain~~

The bear went over the mountain

The bear went over the mountain

to see what he could see ...

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A fire raged in an old farmhouse. The indifferent flames were feeding on the pages of a manuscript. It was a novel called *Destiny and Desire* and its pages curled up at the edge one by one, then flared into light and turned to smoke.

The farmhouse burned quickly. The beams and rafters collapsed into a fiery pile, and when the unsuspecting owner returned, all that was left of his house, and his novel, was a smoking hole in the ground.

The farmhouse had been the sabbatical hideaway of Arthur Bramhall, an American literature professor at the University of Maine. He was ill suited to teaching, as he was subject to depression, and preferred being alone, knowing he was poor company when he was depressed, which was most of the time. He'd purchased the old farm in hopes of having sex with women who'd also moved to the country and might themselves be depressed. Most of these women looked depressed to him, or at least angry, probably about having to live in the country. His plan was that after having sex with them, he'd write a best-selling novel about it. He'd written the novel, but it'd been from his imagination not his experience, for he'd found that women who'd moved to the country wore shapeless overalls, frequently smelled of kerosene, attended solstice festivals, and refused to shave their legs; he thought of them as fur-bearing women, which tended to depress his libido. Consequently, the only excitement he'd had was his house burning down.

Now he stood in the darkness of the winter night with the embers of his disintegrating house lighting his face. Jutting out from the embers were the twisted shapes of his metal filing cabinets, his gooseneck lamp, and his typewriter. He paced along the edge of the hole, looking for traces of charred paper. Bright little tongues of flame licked up at him, cautioning him to keep his distance until they were through. He knelt at the edge of the smoking hole and mourned his lost book.

"I understand that Bramhall has built himself a little cabin with his insurance money," said Bernard Wheelock, a brilliant young lecturer in American literature at the University of Maine.

"Yes, he's rewriting his book," said Alfred Settlemire, a full professor at the same institution. Settlemire was a distinguished-looking figure with a high handsome forehead and a leonine head of hair, accented by a carefully shaped goatee on his prominent chin.

"It was terrible, his book burning in the fire," said Wheelock. "What a blow for a guy who tends to look on the dark side."

"Well, was it actually terrible?" asked Settlemire. "I'm sorry his house burned down, but not for his book—it was a deliberate steal of *Don't, Mr. Drummond*. He told me so himself. He studied all the best-sellers and thought that was the one he could copy."

"Not an easy task," said Wheelock, who'd tried it himself.

"Well, but is that why one takes a sabbatical? To copy a best-seller? Successfully or unsuccessfully? Is that, one asks oneself, why one writes?" Dr. Settlemire used the word *or* a lot. He himself had published a book that traced the use of simile in Robert Frost and among other things it showed that Frost had used the word *like* as a simile .54 times per page. That was the sort of work that meant something. Work of commitment, one felt.

“Have you read any of Bramhall’s book?” asked Wheelock.

Settle mire let out a snort of contempt. “Before the fire, he sent a few chapters to me for comment, which of course one couldn’t really give him, as one didn’t know where to begin. His heroine is making a go of a run-down farm she’s inherited. She smells of kerosene but lovely anyhow.”

“Sounds like it might be interesting.”

Settle mire stroked his excellent goatee. “One knows farms. Studying Frost, one must. The farm in Bramhall’s book is a pipe dream.”

“Poor Bramhall.”

“It’ll never be published. One is quite certain of that.”

In his little cabin, Arthur Bramhall rewrote his book. He did not bother to have his telephone line reconnected, and he saw no one except an old lumberjack who lived on the next ridge and occasionally dropped by to chat. Aside from this, Bramhall had no interruptions. The fire had taught him something, about patience, renewal, fortitude. He gave up trying to write a copy of a best-seller and wrote in a fever of inspiration straight from the heart—about love and longing, and loss, and about the forces of nature, into whose power he’d been initiated. By the last page of the book, his new heroine was glowing with an inner radiance gained from being humbled by nature. There was still lots of sex, but it had a connection to the ancient moods of the forests, to crow songs, and fox cries, and the crackling of a fire in the hearth.

“I’ve written the truth,” said Bramhall as he closed the manuscript and patted it tenderly. In the pit of destroying darkness where his lifelong depression had its seat, he’d lit a tiny lamp of cheer. “Tomorrow you go out into the world,” he said to his manuscript.

He put it in a briefcase and carried it with him out of the house. “I’m going to buy a bottle of champagne for us,” he said to his briefcase. A problem for city dwellers who move to the country is that they have no one to talk to but the septic field, or in this case, their briefcase.

He went across the meadow, far from his cabin, and carefully laid the briefcase under the boughs of an old spruce. The boughs hung to the ground and the manuscript was completely hidden. “If there’s another fire, you’ll still be safe.”

He smoothed out the edges of the pine boughs as he’d done every day for the past few months and smiled with satisfaction at his hiding place.

A bear watched Bramhall from a spot a few hundred yards away. Like Bramhall, the bear was a decent, hardworking sort. He followed his own regular rounds, from the stream where he caught trout and salmon, to the abandoned orchards where he ate apples in the fall, to the mountainside where he gorged on blueberries in summer. He was good-natured, and always hungry. He’d recently broken into the kitchen of a restaurant and eaten all the pies and cakes and then the ice cream and chocolate sauce and a can of colored sprinkles. The tastes and smells of these items haunted him; the balminess of spring seemed to carry them on the air, torturing him. The man had left something valuable under the tree. Maybe it was a pie.

The bear liked to roll in meadows and wave his paws in the air. He ate garbage when it was available and enjoyed rummaging at the dump for pizza boxes with splashes of cheese and other delicacies in them. He lived for his stomach and once a year at the first sign of summer had astounding sex. He was wise to the ways of the forest and crafty when it came to the ways of man; when he’d forced the window of the restaurant, a look of extreme

concentration had come into his beady eyes, not unlike the look Arthur Bramhall had when seated at his typewriter.

Now, as Bramhall got into his car and drove off to buy champagne, the bear padded across the field and slipped under the branches of the pine tree. He approached the briefcase cautiously and sniffed at it. There was no trace of pie. Still, it paid to be thorough. He put his teeth around the handle of the briefcase and carried it deeper into the woods. When he felt secure, he set the briefcase down and whacked it several times. The latches popped and the briefcase opened. He sniffed disappointedly at the manuscript. Termite food, he said to himself, and turned to go, but a line on the first page caught his eye and he read a little way. His reading habits had been confined to the labels on jam jars and cans of colored sprinkles, but something in the manuscript compelled him to read further. "Why," he said to himself, "this isn't bad at all." There was lots of sex and a good bit of fishing, whose details he thought were accurate and evocative. "This book has everything," he concluded. He slipped the manuscript back into the briefcase, clamped the handle in his teeth, and headed toward town.



While his manuscript was being stolen by a bear, Arthur Bramhall was having coffee with a fur-bearing woman. They were in a diner on Main Street in the small town in which they went each week to do their food shopping. "I finished my book," he said to her, and she said, "Well, that's exciting."

"Yes, I suppose it is," he said, attempting to maintain his urbanity though he was secretly bubbling with happiness. If his book succeeded, he'd never have to return from his sabbatical. He'd never have to see the English department again, nor be tempted to eat greasy pizza in the student union building, where his English students sat around reading comic books featuring space Amazons clad in aluminum foil.

"I'm sure it's going to be a success," said the fur-bearing woman kindly, although she had written him off her serious-relationship list. He had a sturdy build and a pleasing head of wavy brown hair; his brown eyes were gentle, and he had a nice smile, but her sort of man had to smell of pine sap and woodsmoke and the great outdoors, as she did. Arthur Bramhall could never be trained up to any sort of satisfactory level. For one thing, he ironed his jeans.

"It's nice running into you," he said. While it was true that he ironed his jeans, he was a decent human being with much natural affection for other people. But because he was shy and introverted, he'd never found a lasting relationship with a woman, and in his loneliness he tended toward moods in which he stared out of his window like a goldfish. Right now he was in the manic phase of his cycle. "What've you been doing with yourself?" he asked with genuine interest.

"Oh, I'm still doing my wellness work," said the fur-bearing woman with a dubious grasp on English but a firm hold on economics. For fifty-five dollars she gave her clients what she called an energy massage. Bramhall had paid her fifty-five dollars only to discover that her hands never touched his body, only swept the air above it with a dyed-purple chicken feather. He pretended to feel much better after this because he liked to encourage others in their work. Now he listened to the fur-bearing woman's latest insights into energy fields, auras, magnetized water, and tried to find her attractive, despite the smell of kerosene. He tried to think of her as resembling the heroine of his book, but the sensually stimulating properties of kerosene worked better on paper than over coffee at the local diner. She said, "You know that the earth is coming into a feminine cycle, don't you?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't know that."

"Yes, the feminine force is getting stronger every day. I'm organizing a moon goddess festival to celebrate it."

Bramhall nodded. The fur-bearing woman loved festivals. On nights when he was only mildly depressed he could help himself get out of it by thinking how wonderful it was that he wasn't at a moon goddess festival.

The fur-bearing woman took his hand in hers. "Close your eyes," she said, "and concentrate on success through Jupiter, the planet of good fortune." The fur-bearing woman was a decent human being too, who sincerely believed she helped others with her purple chicken feather.

Bramhall closed his eyes, and thought again of his briefcase, under the tree. He thought of it the way a Bushman thinks of his carved fetish wrapped in bat skin.

"I see very good things happening with your book," said the fur-bearing woman. "I see"

someone taking it.”

Bramhall felt an effervescent thrill in his abdomen, as if he'd swallowed the Antacid of Happiness. With his eyes closed, he realized she had an understanding voice, and he felt her good will toward him. She was a fruitcake, but so were the other fur-bearing women of Maine. The winters were too long for them, and it drove them into peculiar activities. He hoped his little novel might comfort them. Its hero was a renegade archaeologist looking for fossils in Maine; he too had been humbled by nature and had learned to respect it, and to respect women, for they were the crown of nature. Bramhall thought that the fur-bearing women who read it could believe, for a little while, that the hero had come to *their* run-down farm to respectfully poke around in their fossils.

The bare overhead bulbs of the diner were reflected in the quartz crystal the fur-bearing woman was wearing on a chain around her neck, and it seemed to reflect her isolation as well. He suspected she was as lonely as he. He imagined himself taking her home, running her a hot bath, and leaving a shaving brush and razor conspicuously on the edge of the tub. “I think you might like my book,” he said shyly.

She nodded in agreement. “I have the very strong feeling that there's an angel watching over you for your book right now.”



The bear waited at the edge of town until nightfall. As the town was in rural Maine there was only one clothing store, but the bear wasn't fussy. He forced a back window and went in. Going through back windows usually led to shoveling down the sweet but he forced himself to put thoughts of food aside as he prowled the darkened aisle of the store. A display mannequin caused him to draw back cautiously, but his nose quickly ascertained that the human-looking figure was made of wood. He approached the dummy and carefully studied the items of clothing it wore. Then he went and collected those same items in the store, choosing a suit of the kind lumberjacks wear to funerals. He worked himself into a shirt without too much trouble, but fastening the buttons was difficult. He got a few of them through the little holes and called it good enough. After several tries he got himself into the pants. They were on backward, as he hadn't entirely grasped the nature of the garment. "Not a bad fit at all," he remarked as he gazed at his shadowy reflection in the mirror at the back of the store. He slipped into the suit jacket and returned to the store dummy for a quick comparison. The painted eyes of the dummy seemed critical. "A tie, of course," said the bear, and found one with hula dancers on it. His taste was deplorable but he was only a bear. Studying the knot at the dummy's throat, he fashioned his own. "That looks good," he said, though the knot was unusual. He added a baseball cap and shoes, went to the cash register and emptied it, then climbed back out the window. As he hit the pavement, he shook the sleeves of his coat and balanced himself in the upright position. "It's remarkable what a suit can do for a bear," he said.

He walked slowly and clumsily, his shoes unlaced. The briefcase handle was in his teeth and this drew the attention of several passersby. They said nothing, but the bear noticed the superior smiles. What could it be? he wondered. He caught a glimpse of himself in a window and stopped. "Something wrong there," he said to himself as he studied his reflection. Baseball cap is on straight, and the suit looks fine. His small, gleaming eyes stared back at him. Briefcase in the mouth!

Sheepishly, he transferred it to his paw. The old habits are going to die hard, he said to himself as he walked on.

Later, seated in the back row of the diner on Main Street, he opened the briefcase again and examined the title page of the manuscript.

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## DESTINY AND DESIRE

BY

ARTHUR BRAMHALL

Title's fine, thought the bear to himself, but I don't see myself as Arthur Bramhall. No, the name wants changing. Something snappier. It'll come to me.

On the table before him was coffee, toast, and two little pyramids of jam and half-and-half containers. He ran his gaze over the containers thoughtfully.

*Jam*

Perfect name, you can't do better than Jam. Now for a first name.

Again his eyes ran over the labels on the containers.

*Half-and-Half Jam*

Very distinguished.

Or is it too ethnic?

With his paw, he blocked out some of the lettering on the half-and-half container.

*Half Jam*

Sounds too Nordic. But I feel I'm close. Let me just ... a slight modification ...

With the tip of his shiny claw, he covered up the *f* in *Half*.

That's a name that will mean something to people.

There was a pen in the briefcase, and a few blank sheets of paper. With great concentration, he laboriously wrote a new title page:

DESTINY AND DESIRE

BY

HAL JAM



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Arthur Bramhall returned home that night and went across the field with a flashlight to retrieve his manuscript from beneath its tree. At first he thought he had the wrong tree. He ran from tree to tree, yanking back branches and shining his flashlight on the ground.

“No,” he cried, “no, no.”

He stared through the trees at the cold, pitiless moon rising through the branches, the moon of thieves and crossroads. He fell on his knees and beat his fists on the ground. Then he got up and ran through the fields screaming, “It’s gone! It’s gone!” He shook his fist at the trees and shouted, “Why? Why did you do this to me again?” When he came to his senses, he sought the help of Vinal Pinette, the old lumberjack who lived nearby. Vinal Pinette came and investigated the scene under the tree.

“Bear.”

“What?”

“A bear’s got ’er.”

“A bear’s got my briefcase?”

The old lumberjack pointed to faint indentations in the ground. “Tracks are right there.”

“Well, let’s follow him!”

“A bear travels fast when he wants to. Could be in the next county by now.”

Arthur Bramhall fell back against the trunk of the tree. He’d already spent what little resilience he had. Years of depression and uncertainty had plundered him, and now a bear had finished him. “My life is over.”

“Had valuables in that suitcase?”

“My novel.” Bramhall stared at Vinal Pinette. Much as he liked the old man, he knew Pinette couldn’t grasp the significance of what had been lost.

“We kin go after him,” said Pinette, “but I don’t think it’ll amount to much. They al’uz say—if the bear sees you, you won’t see the bear.”

“Yes,” said Bramhall woodenly, not wishing to cause any more inconvenience to his neighbor. He stumbled back through the field, his brain mixing up that killer cocktail he knew so well, the one that was going to result in him feeling like a corroded anchor at the bottom of the sea.

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“It’s a marvelous book,” said Chum Boykins of the Boykins Literary Agency, “but of course I don’t have to tell you that.”

The bear nodded, and Chum Boykins smiled, tapping his finger on the face of the manuscript. “What I like best is how *fresh* it is. At the same time, it has a haunting familiarity, of something we’ve never fully appreciated.”

The bear nodded again, modestly. His pants were no longer on backward, and his confidence was growing. Outside the office windows was the buzz of the great hive of humanity; its frenzied activity was difficult to fathom, but he soothed himself with candy bars, several of which were in his pockets right now.

“I’ve got an editor in mind,” said Boykins. “Do you know Elliot Gadson at Cavendish Press? I think he’s our man. He’s got the clout, he’s the right age, and this is the kind of book he loves. I’m going to call him and get the wheels in motion.”

Boykins pressed his intercom. “Margaret, get Elliot Gadson for me, would you, please?” He turned back to the bear. “Elliot knows I only call him when I’ve got something special. Do you want coffee?”

“Sugar,” growled the bear, carefully pronouncing the most important word in his limited vocabulary.

“Margaret, bring us a coffee, would you, please, lots of sugar. Thanks.” Boykins smiled at the bear. “Anybody ever tell you how much you resemble Hemingway?”

“Who?”

“Yes, who indeed. I think you just might be the one to make people forget him.”

“Pie,” said the bear to the waiter at the French restaurant to which Boykins had taken him.

“Nothing else?” asked Boykins.

“Cake ice cream.”

“It’s nice to see someone who’s not obsessed about their weight.”

“Winter,” said the bear, patting his stomach.

“Yes, it *was* a difficult winter.” Boykins’s eyes were dark, their gaze intense. His gestures were precise. He leaned forward, supporting his chin with thumb and forefinger. “Have you got anybody representing you on the West Coast? A Hollywood agent? Because the cinematic possibilities for your book are very strong. I can just see that huge solstice bonfire on the big screen.”

Boykins moved the vase on the table a few inches to the right. Yes, he said to himself, that’s better. Boykins had spent his childhood performing numberless compulsive rituals; in the middle of the night his parents would find him standing bolt upright in his room, the coils of compulsion holding him paralyzed.

“In fact, the whole book reads like a movie, which I’m sure isn’t news to you. It’s a brilliant piece of crossover work.” He smoothed the edge of the tablecloth down, several times. As a child, Boykins had no time for sport, no time for girls, no time for anything but smoothing his pillow hundreds of times, then standing on one leg in the bedroom, arms raised for hours in supplication to the faceless power that ruled him. “I’ve started working with a wonderful young woman at Creative Management. I’m sure you’d get along with her very

well.”

The bear wanted to be careful about those he got involved with. “She like pie?”

“Pie?”

“Yes.”

“Well,” laughed Boykins, “I’m sure she likes it. Whether she eats much of it, I can’t say. Boykins crunched a piece of celery in his strong jaws and chewed it thirty-seven times. While standing bolt upright in his college dormitory the night before graduation, and clicking his fingers thirty-seven times, he’d wondered how he could ever fit into the normal world with such an affliction. “I can tell you this, Zou Zou Sharr is one of the smartest women in Hollywood. And she’s beautiful, for whatever that’s worth. She knows the important directors, she knows the stars, and she’s a tough negotiator. And just so *you* know it,” smiled Boykins, “so am I.” Brutal negotiations were nothing to a man who’d spent his youth as a young manhood standing on one leg. Who could back him down? In spite of his savagery negotiating, publishers liked him. When they took on a writer represented by Boykins, they knew Boykins would edit text, design jackets, write ad copy, invent publicity gimmicks, drum up the sales force, call reviewers, court the media, and woo bookstores. His quiet insanity drove him to seek control over everything and it paid off in sales. “I don’t like to use the word *trendy*, Hal, but I think your book definitely touches a contemporary nerve.”

The bear sniffed, enjoying the weave of perfumes and colognes in the air, which made him feel as if he were in a field of flowers. He sipped some wine. His only previous experience with alcohol was a bottle of cooking sherry he’d downed while rampaging in the kitchen of the rural Maine restaurant; its effect had been blurred by the great number of pies that accompanied its ingestion. Now the effect was more noticeable and his sensitivity to the fragrant air increased. His nose, which for years had led his instincts, led him now, without deliberation, without preliminary weighing of what was at stake. He slid out of his chair and down onto the floor of the restaurant, where he rolled around with his paws in the air as a bear will do when he finds a field of flowers that fills him with happiness.

Boykins went rigid in his chair. His client was making an ass of himself. On the other hand, to roll off your chair and writhe ecstatically on the floor in the middle of lunch showed remarkable freedom from constraint. Boykins, bolt upright in body and soul, saw in Hal Jarvis the image of what he’d never been, a happy child at play in the dream of life. Boykins stared in fascination.

The headwaiter was not fascinated. He charged over, outraged at this breach of etiquette in his elegant domain.

The bear twisted back and forth, using the accepted bear maneuver of raising arms and legs to get momentum into the twist and thus scratch more thoroughly and more deeply. His eyes were half-slitted with ecstasy. The face of the headwaiter was indistinct, but the waiter’s mustache, and his whining voice, had the semblance of a weasel.

“Monsieur, please, not during lunch!”

Bears don’t like their good times interrupted by impertinent weasels. The bear’s paw shot out. The head-waiter had spent a lifetime dodging through swinging doors. He ducked and the blow sailed past the tip of his mustache.

Boykins dropped to one knee beside his client, first making sure that his knee landed precisely in the center of one of the carpet’s rectangular patterns. “Hal, I think you’re drunk.”

The bear froze, aware of many pairs of eyes on him.

I'm getting a feeling here, he said to himself. Possible blunder?

He quickly flopped onto his stomach, pushed himself upright, and took his seat with as much dignity as he could muster, which was considerable, owing to a life of undisputed primacy in the forest.

The headwaiter had a similar authority in the room he ruled, and was equally skilled in the restoration of dignity, aided by Boykins quickly slipping him a twenty.

Boykins lifted the wine bottle. "I've seen too many writers ruin themselves on this stuff, Hal. And you don't need it. You're the real thing already."

The voice of Boykins blended with the other human voices in the room, becoming the sound of bees. "Bees honey," said the bear, his elbow sliding forward on the table.

He's fried to the eyebrows, thought Boykins.

"Honey life," said the bear, fighting to create easy conversation, but he could feel people's glances and their superior smiles. They spoke their thoughts effortlessly, while his moved ponderously. His agent was looking at him anxiously, with no idea of what he was trying to say about honey. And he himself didn't know. I'm floundering, he said to himself. Panic shot through him, and his eyes darted back and forth.

"Well," said Boykins, trying to return to the orderly procession of business matters, "how do you feel about publicity?"

The question broke apart into pieces and the bear couldn't fit the pieces together. His long tongue ran nervously over his snout. A woman who'd just joined a party of Tempo Co executives at an adjacent table noticed the bear and kept her eyes fastened on him as the voices of her male colleagues broke dully around her. Now, there, she thought as the bear's red velvet tongue slipped over his nose again, is a man.

"The sales force will insist on a tour," said Boykins, "if we get the kind of money I'll be going after."

The bear had lost the thread to which he'd managed to cling from Maine to Manhattan. The buzz of the restaurant was an unbearable judgment on his animality. He slapped his paw over his ears.

"I understand, Hal, you don't want to hear about it yet. You've just written a novel and it's precious to you. But these days the author is as much the product as the book."

The racing stream of human speech glistened as it curved around obstacles and glided on relentless in its gradient, while he panted in animal stupidity.

And then his nose twitched, the olfactory bulb at its root a thousand times more sensitive than that of a human. He straightened and moved his head around to isolate the natural scent he'd found within the synthetic veil of perfumes. There it was, moist, cool. "Salmon."

"Yes, they do it skewered with tomatoes, mushrooms, and green peppers."

"Raw," said the bear with a resurgence of primal authority.

"Raw?"

"Raw female. Lots of eggs. In my teeth." The bear tapped at his incisors.

My god, thought Boykins, he is another Hemingway.



Arthur Bramhall stared at the blank sheet of paper in his typewriter. He had no words, no thoughts, no inspiration. This time the forces of nature had broken him. He rested his head on the space bar. "I should have used a computer. Everything would be on a floppy disk. But I was afraid of all the power failures in the boondocks. I said, if a typewriter was good enough for Hemingway, it's good enough for me. What a tragic conceit."

He lifted his head. Beside him on the desk was a mug from the University of Maine, with its emblem—a black bear—painted on the side. He picked it up and put it away in a drawer. Then he stared out the window of his office toward the tree under which he'd left his briefcase. He strained to see beyond it, into the woods, hoping for the sight of a real black bear lumbering by with a briefcase, but the only sight was Vinal Pinette strolling down the lane. Bramhall got up from his desk as the old lumberjack entered the cabin. "Why did he take it, Vinal?" asked Bramhall. "What use would a bear have for a briefcase?"

"Bears are funny creatures," said Vinal Pinette. "I had one steal a shirt of mine off the clothes-line. Gave it an awful thrashing and then threwed it aside. Something about that shirt he didn't like, I suppose, and he got worked up about it."

"I feel as if I'm dying," Bramhall admitted, hoping that by some miracle Pinette would have words of wisdom for him, gleaned from long years of country living. He had put his character like Pinette in *Destiny and Desire*, an old backwoods philosopher who entered crucial moments like this and saved the day with his hard-won natural wisdom.

"I used to feel just the same," said Pinette. "Felt that way every year in spring when the timber company airplane sprayed us with DDT. It knocked the spots right out of me. The timber folks said it was the very best stuff in the world, and I don't doubt it was, I just didn't seem to take to it." Then, looking into Bramhall's sagging countenance, Pinette said, "But what I always say is if you ain't got a noseful of porcupine quills, you're doing okay."

Bramhall put his face in his hands. "How can I go back to the University of Maine and face my colleagues?"

"They pay good wages up to the college, do they?" Like most country people, Vinal Pinette took a great interest in wages earned in exotic places.

"I don't want their wages. I want freedom."

"Arf McArdle used to talk about freedom too. Had a wife, eleven kids, and a mother-in-law who was as tough as a steel-toed boot. One day the mother-in-law sent him to the store for some soap, and nobody ever saw him again. Something about that request for soap set Arf on a course for parts unknown."

Bramhall gazed out the window again, toward huge fleecy clouds moving slowly overhead. "I thought my book was really good. But maybe I was deluded. Maybe it was only fit for a bear."

"Bears ain't fussy, it's true." After dispensing this profound piece of country wisdom Vinal Pinette turned his cap around in his fingers, and Bramhall's gaze drifted toward the window. The clouds looked like bears in a chorus line, in top hats and tails, kicking up their heels.

Staring at these exuberant forms, he felt the desperate desire that had driven him all these months—to be freed from drudgery and to have a literary destiny. Longing for it twisted his

guts, and then, perhaps because of his lifelong habit of depression, he let go—let go of desire, let go of his imagined destiny, let *Destiny and Desire* slip through his fingers like the string of a kite, let it fly away. He could almost see it, a golden cord whipping up into the air, out of reach. He slumped in his chair, and the golden cord went sailing, into the clouds. And he felt strangely relaxed in his ruin.



The bear entered the Port Authority building off Times Square in Manhattan. He was going back to Maine on the next Greyhound bus. The panic he'd suffered at the restaurant was only the beginning; if he attempted to stay in the human world, the buzz would cause him to crack; he'd expose himself as a bear and be put in a zoo. He carried his empty briefcase, to help him pass as a human being.

"Lemme carry that for you, sir," said a criminal in a jogging suit, to which was attached a plastic tag that said Baggage Assistant.

"No," said the bear, and cradled the empty briefcase more tightly under his arm.

"Somebody could take it from you," insisted the bogus Baggage Assistant, but the bear kept walking, past lines of down-at-the-heels travelers waiting to board buses to other places, which to be down-at-the-heels. The bear didn't know these travelers were in worse shape than he was. He didn't know they would have given anything to have an agent. He didn't know that everybody in America wanted an agent. He didn't know he was throwing away the opportunity that every true American dreams of, to be a celebrity. This was because he was a bear.

Three fun-loving skinheads who needed money saw the bear's portly, good-natured figure coming toward them and decided he'd be easy prey. They surrounded him, acting as if they knew him. "Hey, Jack, where you going with that briefcase?"

Their leader wore a Nazi helmet and had renamed himself Heimlich in honor of the man who ran the SS, not knowing he'd confused the Heimlich maneuver for rescuing choking victims and Heinrich Himmler.

"I'm not Jack," said the bear.

"Give me that briefcase," snapped Heimlich. "That's an order! *Achtung!*"

The bear stared away down the long corridor of the building, a distant look in his eyes. He didn't want to attract attention to himself, but he needn't have worried, as everyone in the Authority building was busy looking the other way.

"Give it," repeated Heimlich, pointing at the briefcase.

"Why?" asked the bear, thinking there was a problem of communication.

"We're the *Obermensch*. We take what we want." Heimlich liked to sprinkle German words into what he said. One of these days he'd take a Living Fucking Language course and astonish everyone with his German. "Now give me your wallet and that briefcase."

"No," said the stubborn bear.

The skinheads grabbed the bear by the arms, and Heimlich reached for the briefcase. The bear, feeling his only link to humanity being taken from him, gave a backhanded swipe that dislocated Heimlich's jaw and removed a sizable portion of his nose. Then he twirled Heimlich upside down, grabbed his ankles, and swung him. Heimlich's helmeted head became a blurred streak of steel striking each of the other skinheads in the face with a *whong-whong* sound. Heimlich's head rattled inside the helmet, soundly concussing itself. From that point forward he would hear his treasured recording of "Deutschland über Alles" through a nice case of tinnitus.

The other skinheads had their arms up, trying to shield themselves from the blur of metal. Its impact twisted them around, breaking ribs and elbows, and a large automatic weapon

bounced along the floor of the bus station. An elderly woman picked it up.

As Heimlich desperately tried to fit his nose back on, the bear looked anxiously about afraid the crowd would attack him for such a bestial act. He started to hurry away, but not that the danger was past, the crowd applauded, crying, "Way to go" and "Nice piece of work."

And, with the automatic in her shopping bag, the elderly woman got on a bus to visit her aggravating son-in-law in New Jersey.



Arthur Bramhall followed Vinal Pinette into the entranceway of a small farmhouse. Wood was stacked neatly in the yard, and a pail of fresh water was beside the door. “What you need,” said Pinette, “is more sociability. Fred’ll cheer you up.” He knocked on the door. “Fred, you there?”

“Come on in,” said a voice from inside.

Pinette and Bramhall entered. A burly man in work pants and shirt sat by the stove. “Art,” said Pinette, “this is Fred Severance. Fred, this is Art Bramhall, from up the college. I thought you and me could cheer him up.”

Bramhall saw that his host was depressed, could feel it, could almost smell it.

“She left me, Vinal.” Severance shook his head sadly, then remembered his duties as host. “You boys want some tea?”

The wood stove held pots and pans dented and blackened by a lifetime’s use. Severance’s face was reflected in the gleaming chrome of the stove, his head elongated in the metal, as if a zucchini squash were growing in his brain. Well-used harnesses hung on the wall, along with antique snowshoes. The only contemporary note was a framed color photograph of a young woman.

“That’s her,” said Severance, noting the direction of Bramhall’s gaze. His voice was low and solemn. “World Federation of Wrestlers come to town for their annual show, and off she went.”

“Cleola went off with a wrestler, did she?” inquired Pinette.

“Yes, she did. And I blame myself.”

“You can’t blame yourself,” said Pinette.

Severance’s gaze returned to the photo of his beloved. It was a studio photograph, of the kind taken at high school graduation. “I shouldn’t of let her go, Vinal. Not to wrestling. ‘Cause now she’s out on the road with a tattooed midget.”

“Her family was always fond of travel,” admitted Pinette. Then, delicately, he changed the subject. “Show Art that contraption under the stove.”

Severance rolled out a crudely carved length of wood, whose center was about the size and shape of a pair of bowling balls. “Beavers did that. And rolled it for miles.”

Bramhall stared at the astonishing sculpture, whose mechanical utility could not be denied. It had the presence of a totem; it riveted his gaze, as if he’d met it somewhere before—his dreams of the last few nights had been terribly strange and colorful, involving all sorts of animals both real and monstrous.

Beavers, he thought to himself, they chiseled this with their teeth. But he felt how much more there was to the object than simply the tools with which the little sculptors had created it. There was an emanation coming from it, of soulful gnawing in the moonlight, while the forest was still and men were asleep. Then the beavers worked, and Bramhall, with a strange floating sensation, felt himself go to them, felt himself crouching beside them on the wooded hill above their pond, the hill down which they would roll their prize. Their eyes flashed at him, signaling a pact he could seal with them, if he desired.

With a jolt of fear, he felt himself snap back from the vision. His body twitched in the chair, as if he’d just rebounded from a long elastic swing through the forest.

“Not too many people know beavers invented the wheel,” said Pinette to Bramhall. “And *that’s* the kind of story—” He slapped his knee for emphasis. “—you want to tell when you get to writing your new book.”

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