

Old Bear Run

By

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It was dark. Although morning, it was as dark as night.

The fire had burned some 2 million acres of virgin forest and was raging in from three different directions. The great Northwestern expanse has been turned into a vast wasteland. All around him lay the destruction of man and nature. Hot heavy winds fanned the flames, sending billowing clouds of smoke a hundred miles off the coast of Washington. The carcasses of dead animals suffocated by the smoke, lay next to the logger roads, littering the ground to either side. Every so often along the highway he saw the melted form of a car or pickup; the telephone poles and cables looked like limp fishing rods, their lines dangling freely; signs were charred; bent up like warped playing cards.

The smoke from the fire choked him as he walked up the tracks; its smell permeated his clothes, his skin, and his lungs. All around him lay the charred hulks of once tall conifers; the blackened soil crunched under the soles of his boots. His breath was labored, and as he walked up the tracks carrying a large camouflaged bag, sweat oozed from every pore of his body. His face, arms, and hands were brown from the ground and sun burnt. He walked slowly, painstakingly. He was a tall, gaunt man in his early twenties.

Small brush fires smoldered to either side of him. His boots hissed where the earth was still hot.

He took a kerchief out of his rucksack, dampened it with his canteen and wrapped it around his face so that it covered his nose and mouth. Light from the sun began to filter through the thick haze. Here and there bright splotches shown in the otherwise darkened landscape.

Down in the valley, he could see armies of firefighters disgorged from their trucks and mounting an assault up the mountainside. He did not want to be discovered-he hastily turned to go inland. He found a dirt trail that he followed for to a brook. He drank hard and long from the bubbling water.

The track took him along a ridge high up in the mountains. Below him, the brook ran into a swift moving stream- its clear blue water glistening and shining in the noonday sun. The man cut across country avoiding the red clayed truck roads as much as possible.

He stopped for lunch. He pulled a loaf of bread and a slab of bologna out of his duty bag and began eating. When he accidentally dropped a chunk of bologna on the floor of the woods; he watched intently as armies of ants devoured the meat. Like so many teeth, nibbling at the flesh colored pink. Later along down the trail he watched a colonies of ants continued with their work of building, organizing, disciplining. Each army of ants was organized into battalions, companies, brigades, and finally platoons. Its own commander-in-chief led each army.

(1) That is when he first spotted the four bears. A mother bear and her three cubs. They were along the river. He watched the bears in the river eating a large fish, their white teeth ripping away at the layers of rich red meat; its eyes still blinking unconsciously like a nervous habit that won't stop.

(2) He watched the bear in the river eating large fish; her teeth ripping away the layers of rich red meat; its eyes still blinking unconsciously; like a bad nervous habit that won't stop.

(3) He watched her huge claws tear off its head. Her massive size both frightened and excited him. She ambled up the bank and joined her brood of the three cubs feeding on smaller fish. For the rest of the day, the man and the bears shadowed each other as they made their way along the riverbank.

A badger was making a nest. The badger put the scrap of bread, which the man had dropped into its nest. He watched as one of the field mice stole the bread, which was in the badger's nest. The badger bit at the neck of the mouse, and it was dead. The young man marveled at how quickly and decisively justice had been meted out.

All in all, he loved the land. He loved the mountains, the cold quiet streams, and the fields of richly golden hay or yellow corn. He was free from the conformity of

a rigid, arbitrary, and unforgiving existence- an existence in which his very life breath seemed to be snuffed out.

In the thick underbrush, he came upon two paths- two separate paths. One went high up over the ridge to the east; the other went west along the river. One was a logger road still in use; the other not as wide, and not used as much. It was an old bear run. It ran rough through the brush down to the mouth of the great river.

The track ended. The man in twenties struck off through the rugged terrain. He began to run, dodging trees and boulders as they lay strewn in his path. His uniform became torn.

He continued down the old bear run. Pretty soon soldiers from the fort in Washington would come and find him. Soon after, that there would be a court's martial and a different kind of justice would be dealt. The man's brow was furrowed with thought. The muscles in his neck, forehead, and shoulders stiffened. He clutched his fist. He should turn back. He should give himself up. It was the right thing, the only thing to do. It was his duty. Yet his feet carried him further down the path; the deserter's sack swinging side to side hitting his hips as he marched onward.

The sun broke through the thick smoky haze and a pair of jaybirds zigzagged through the tops of the pines. Everything would be all right, he thought to himself, all he had to do was to get home, and all would be forgiven. He knew he had a future; it just wasn't in this man's army. They would hide him, until he could get his feet back on the ground- until he could start over, anew as it were.

He thought back to his last furlough; he'd seen his old man back on the homestead in Idaho. The colonel, they called him.

The last time he visited the old man, he found him standing on the veranda in the back of the house, overlooking the apple orchard. His riding crop slapped against his thigh impatiently. Bronzed by the sun, short white crew cut hair; the old man's pipe emitted its pungent white cloud of smoke.

From somewhere in the colonel's quarters, an old cuckoo clock sounded.

As he approached the old soldier, he pointed as if on cue to a row of bushes lining the driveway.

“You see that stand of bushes boy?”

“Yes, I see them father.”

“Notice how they are arranged, all lined up like that?”

“Yes.”

“Notice how straight and erect they’re growing?”

“Yes, Father.”

“They don’t grow like that normally. One has to prune them. Tie them up. Bend them so they stand straight. Every so often one has to go out there and cut them back, way back, so as to remove extra branches it doesn’t need.”

“You understand boy?”

“Yes Sir.”

“It was like that in ‘this man’s army;’ the army I joined right out of high school just before Pearl Harbor. Both your grandparents died leaving me practically homeless. At that point the army took over as my parents, helped me grow to be a man. “

“Yes, you’ve told me.”

“That was right after the Depression. People were starving to death. One couldn’t make it on the farm.”

“It was tough.”

“Real tough. But you wouldn’t know about that would you? Been raised pretty darned good, don’t you think?”

“Yes father.”

“How’s the army treating you?”

“Good.”

“Good? What do you mean ‘good?’ Don’t you mean excellent?”

“Excellent!”

“Now don’t cut me off boy. I am not done talking.” His riding crop was hitting his leg furiously now. The old man seemed worn and frazzled.

“I just don’t know if you have it in you son, to be a good soldier. To fight and kill the enemy when your country tells you to.”

“Yes sir, I man “no sir!!”

Just then, his sister came out in her wheelchair and announced that dinner was ready. The house was like a war museum; a squat red brick house with a wooden porch attached to the master bedroom.

After dinner, the children would adjourn to the family room to play chess, cribbage, or scrabble. The men would go to the library to smoke cigars, drink brandy, and talk about world politics, while the ladies would tidy up.

That was many, many years ago.

Suddenly, he turned around to go back. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a rustling in bushes and the big thing was upon him. And everything went dark.

The clouds come in from the ocean; the entire horizon growing gray at first; then darker and darker, like some celestial stagecoach, the cumulus clouds charged over the sky above, until it was black except for the faint rays of sun many miles off the coast. The wind picked up from the west and blew for a few minutes before it shifted to the north.

In the forest, the birds flew around frantically in a circle before regrouping and heading en masse to the south. The wind began blowing up dust along the trails; small branches and leaves catapulted sideways for a few feet and came to rest.

Then it began to rain. At first, the droplets were so small you could hardly see them. More like a mist. But then it began to rain harder. What was once a minor wetness began to show some strength; the sudden drop in temperature measured the depth of the ensuing storm. Nickel sized rain drops turned to quarters; when the drops got to be half dollar sized they turned to hail pelting the ground as a barrage of bullets. And all the while, the wind grew in strength and intensity. The bear and her cubs were nowhere to be seen.

And then it stopped. The sky brightened. Tiny green sprouts appeared next to the dead man's body.

THE END.