

## **Bear tells his story**

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I first became acquainted with Bear when I was doing some research into animal psychology, and was required to spend hours on end watching the animals at the zoo. When I first caught sight of him, he was sitting perfectly still in the darkest corner of his enclosure – motionless, lacking in spirit, he was a big disappointment to the majority of visitors, who derived their pleasure from watching animals far more powerful than themselves making futile gestures of ferocity. I was more interested in Bear's mind, and I quickly found that his unfriendly demeanour was just a façade – being a proud old creature, he never made the first move, but if you asked him a question, he just couldn't help but reply. It was the oldest trick in the book – everybody loves talking about themselves – but for once, it was what I wanted to hear, and Bear spent the first month or so of our friendship telling me all about his life in the forest all that time ago, and how he had come to be here. As soon as he began to tell his tale, his whole manner changed – everything, from his posture to his style of narration, acquired an air of authority which gripped me. I quickly forgot about the other animals, and each time I returned to the zoo I headed straight for the big old Bear in the corner.

It is a blessing that he told his story when he did. Bear was old when we first became friends, and it is just possible that, had I arrived just a month or so later, the entire tale would have remained hidden away inside that great bulk of a body of his – a life about to end, and a story left untold. I carried on visiting Bear after he had narrated the events leading up to his capture, but without a story to tell, his talk lacked the dynamism of our earlier conversations. I began to tell him about my own life, but it soon became clear that either Bear was not as good at listening as he was at talking, or he just wasn't interested in what I had to say. Now, I cannot help but feel that telling his story to a sympathetic ear was what Bear had been waiting for – he had spent his life trying to understand himself, and a lifetime of failing either to understand or to be understood by others had worn him down. His story was all that remained, and now that it was told, he had nothing left to give.

My respect for Bear was such that I attributed any utterance that he made with the greatest significance. I became frustrated when he began sentences that just trailed off in the middle, never to be concluded. Increasingly, I would listen only to hear nothing but vagueness. At first I had the impression that Bear had something terribly important to say; that there was some final handful of thoughts rattling around in his muddled old head, trying to get out. But soon I realised that his words no longer had any meaning, and that his sentences were drifting into obscurity as he realised that he actually had nothing to say. It was like talking to somebody who was permanently half asleep – he was on another plane now; reality was just something that interrupted his dreams now and again, making demands that he was too tired to meet.

It was a shame that Bear lost his ability to think straight so long before he actually lost his life. For me, as soon as those tired eyes failed to sparkle when you asked him a question, we had already lost him. But the zoo attendants, who had never bothered to ask

him any questions in the first place, just shook their heads as they noticed his movement getting slower and his motivation deteriorating, and said: "Poor thing's getting old now." Part of me wanted to scream out against the pointlessness of such patronising remarks, but when I saw them all mechanically feeding the animals and cleaning the enclosures, I realised that screaming out would just provide them with something else to misunderstand.

It was a completely novel experience for me. Previously, the only people who had died had been distant relatives, normally people I hardly ever saw and didn't know very well anyway. I had always known that, at some point, I would lose somebody that I really cared about, but I had always envisaged that the person in question would be here one moment, then gone the next. They would die, and I would begin to cope with not having them around anymore. I never imagined that somebody could disappear in the sense of being irreversibly changed, but still here; that we would reach the point where death was close and inevitable, where the person no longer even knew who I was (as eventually happened with Bear), but was still *there*, eating and sleeping, not quite dead.