July 2014

Bearland

James Nelson

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Katie’s parents were yelling at each other in the kitchen. It was breakfast on a Saturday morning. Katie sat at the table, trying to cut her waffles. She couldn’t tell why her parents were arguing. Something about money. They yell a lot, she thought. She dug her fork sloppily into her waffles in two places, finally freeing a small piece, and then dunked it into the pile of syrup on her plate.

“You don’t need a new car right now,” Katie’s mother said. She was still making pancakes. “There’s absolutely nothing wrong with the one you have.”

“Well the heat doesn’t work for starters,” Katie’s father said. “You want me to drive around with no heat when winter comes?” He sat at the table with Katie.

“So fix the damn heat; you don’t need a whole new car. There’s no money for it. You just want something flashier to drive around in.”

“I want a safe car that’s not going to break down every couple hundred miles, I don’t think that’s too much to ask. And there’s plenty of money.”

She stopped flipping the pancakes. “How come there’s always plenty of money when you want something, but when I want something funds are tight?”

He sighed. “This isn’t something I want, it’s something I need.”

“It’s something you want. Your engine’s fine, your transmission’s fine. Suck it up.”

He grinned and raised his eyebrows simultaneously. The grin erupted into a sarcastic laugh. “Suck it up?” he said.

“I wanted new windows. Something we actually need considering the ones we have now are twenty years old and are horribly insulated. New windows would save us money over time, and wouldn’t cost nearly as much as a new car, but where was the money for those?”

The two continued to yell. Katie finished about half of her waffles and decided she was full. She asked to be excused. “Yeah, sweetie, go ahead,” her father said and she climbed out of her chair and walked upstairs to her room while her parents proceeded to cite examples of one another’s poor financial decisions.

When Katie got to her room she began to play with her stuffed animals. They were mostly an army of bears—male and female, grown-up and little, all kinds of colors and materials. The more important ones had names, like Reginald Bear, the British aristocrat with the monocle
who got rich exploiting farmers, or Suzy Mae Bear, the teenage southern
debutante in a pink frilly dress who was hiding a pregnancy from
Momma and Papa bear, hoping to hold out long enough to raise the
money for an abortion. The bear that knocked her up, Billy Reese Bear,
had told her he don’t wanna be with no bearsluts, and that if she ever
told anyone that that baby was his he’d kill her in her sleep. Billy Reese
Bear was a bit unbalanced; Katie didn’t like playing with him very much.
And then there was Esmeralda Bear—Katie’s favorite. Esmeralda Bear
was big and wore a long, elegant dark-purple dress that went way down
past her feet. Her eyes had crystals on them that shimmered the entire
color spectrum when underneath the light. Esmeralda Bear always had
the scoop on the lives of all the other bears. She was the one who told
Katie everyone’s stories—like Boris Bear, the Russian immigrant who
eagerly brought his family to America only to have his hand ripped off by
a thresher in a “chicken” processing factory and have his family turned out
on the streets (his two-year-old son later died of pneumonia), or Chester
Bear, the owner of the shabby, run-down house that he rented to Boris
Bear’s family for an exorbitant fee, and many, many like it. Esmeralda knew
everything about everyone. Nothing in Bearland ever escaped her.

The class division in Bearland was very noticeable. The aristocrat bears,
who were outnumbered five-to-one, stayed on the bed and had tea parties
and balls, while the working class bears stayed on the floor and, if they were
older than four, toiled in the factories for 17 hours a day. After work, the
Momma bears would take the little bears home while the Papa bears went
to the bars and drank and drank and spent their family’s hard earned wages.
During the day some of the aristocrat husband bears would come down to
the floor and oversee the worker bears while their wives stayed at home with
the baby bears and their maid bears. If one of the working class bears was
doing his job inefficiently or complained about the dangerous conditions,
the aristocrat bear overseeing him would dock his pay. Almost every day
it seemed a worker bear would get maimed or lose a limb (there were bear
appendages and stuffing all over Katie’s floor that usually got swept up and
put into the vats to become Splunkard’s Famous Bear Feed).

The classes rarely interacted with another on a personal level. They had
absolutely nothing in common except for one thing—they both feared
Esmeralda. Esmeralda was the only bear in all Bearland that had magical
powers. She could change the fortunes of any who lived in Bearland for the
better or worse. With a wave of her hand a working class bear could lose his
job/limbs/house/family or get rich quick in the oil business and move up to the bed, while the aristocrat bears could put their competitors out of business and double their wealth or lose everything in bad investments and end up among the working class bears on the hooked rug, who after having been treated so harshly show them no sympathy. It was a completely random process. She had no loyalties to or sympathy for anyone. Esmeralda wasn't merely a bear; she was the decider of fates, the overseer of the overseers. Many resented and abhorred her. Others loved and praised her for her kindness. Katie loved to play with her the most. Condemning or rewarding other bears was more fun than tea parties and mass assembly lines.

Esmeralda was on the bed. The aristocrat bears were having a social gathering at the Montgomery Bear residence. They drank port from tiny little cups and discussed the economy. They were suddenly silent as they spotted Esmeralda. She walked around them slowly, Katie’s arms at her sides moving her around the crowd in quick, bouncy steps.

Esmeralda circled the group several times, getting faster as she went. The bears didn't make eye contact, just sat completely motionless. Their apprehension grew with each step she took. Esmeralda kept circling and circling until Katie finally got tired and stopped on Samantha Bear. “You,” Katie said emphatically for Esmeralda, making her stubby arm point at the unlucky bear. “Your husband has found out about your affair and is divorcing you. You must leave the premises and are entitled to nothing.”

“No! Please!” pleaded the bear in Katie’s most high-pitched screaming. “I’m sorry, he meant nothing. Don’t do this to me, please!”

Katie swatted Samantha Bear down onto the floor. She sat her up at her new post in the Splunkard’s Famous Bear Feed factory assembly line, slicing the skin off the chickens. Fifteen minutes in (in bear time, approximately thirty-one seconds in human time) she cut off a third of her left paw (she had had no experience with a cleaver whatsoever). Katie grabbed a pair of scissors from her school crafts box and cut off the proper material. “Oh God, it hurts!” she screamed. Katie sent her back home for the day and went back up on the bed to consult with Esmeralda.

“What should we do now?” she said. She stared at the bear’s crystal eyes, shimmering beautifully under the sunlight pouring in through her window. Esmeralda had some new ideas for playtime. The bears had begun...
to bore her. They were such weak, undeserving creatures. “You want me to grab Rusty Gowan Bear?” Katie said before flushing him out of the pile of bears on the floor. Rusty Gowan Bear had knocked up his girlfriend, Cynthia Tomlinson Bear, but was kicked out of her life after years of alcohol and drug abuse culminated in persistent outbursts of violence. She found someone else and he never even got to meet his kid. Rusty Gowan Bear wore tattered rags and had purple marker drawn in under his eyes. “What should I do with Rusty?”

Katie went back downstairs with the unfortunate looking bear. Her parents were still shouting in the kitchen. They were louder than they had been before. Back and forth and back and forth without skipping a beat. “Mommy,” Katie said. Neither of them heard her. “Mommy,” she said again a little louder. “Mommy!”

The two stopped their argument and focused on Katie. “What is it, sweetie?” her mother said.

"Where’s Daddy?"

Her parents looked at each other and back to Katie. “What are you talking about, Pumpkin?” her father said. “I’m right over here.”

“You’re not Daddy. Where is he, Mommy?”

“Sweetie, I don’t understand. Your daddy’s right over—”

“My real daddy.”

Her father stared accusingly at her mother. “What did you tell her?”

“Nothing, I don’t know where she’s getting this. Katie, what—”

“Rusty Gowan.”

Her mother froze.

“Oh my God,” he said and slammed the table. “I can’t believe this. Why would you fucking tell her? You didn’t think we had enough problems? Haven’t I been a good dad?”

“I didn’t tell her, I swear! This doesn’t make sense; why would I want—Katie who told you this?”

“Esmeralda Bear.”

“Oh it was the bear, Cynthia. That’s who told her. Not you. The goddamned bear.” He stormed out of the kitchen.

“Scott, please! I didn’t!” She turned to Katie. “Katie you have to tell me who really told you—” She saw the bear in Katie’s arm, broken and dilapidated—a sad, ugly bear. She snatched it from her. “Where did you get this?”

“It’s Rusty Gowan Bear,” Katie said. “He’s had a sad life. Now he’s
homeless and real sick. He'll die soon. You can throw him away. The other bears hate him.”

Her mother was horrified. She simply stood unmoving, staring at the little face, memories flooding back.

“I'm gonna go play some more,” Katie said and ran back upstairs. She accidentally tripped over the working class bears and kicked them out of her way. She got back on the bed where Esmeralda lay and picked her up. The eyes still shimmered seductively in the sunlight, ornate and pristine like fine jewelry. Katie kept her gaze on them, ready to play another game.

— James Nelson