

Second Place

Paula Nixon

Ursa Major

The black bear is a species, *Ursus americanus*, not a color.

Linda Masterson, *Living With Bears Handbook*

The pile of scat was dry and crumbly, not thirty feet from the back of my house. I used a stick to break it apart and found it was full of small brown shells. Later, from an upstairs bathroom window, I looked down on a spot where the bear might have paused to eat nuts—a clearing in a semicircle of piñon trees, the bare ground scattered with empty pine cones.

On long winter nights, at that same window, I gaze up at shining Orion and wonder where the bear is sleeping. Does he ever dream about his earliest days?

January 1995

Somewhere in the forest, high on the mountain above Santa Fe, two tiny newborn black bear cubs—a male and a female, each about the size of a chipmunk—snuggled next to their mother nursing while she slept soundly in a warm, dry den that she had dug in the fall.

Daylight was fading when Dave and I stepped out of the SUV at the side of a dirt road about two miles north of the Santa Fe Plaza. We followed the realtor—long blond hair, jeans tucked into fancy cowboy boots—a few feet down the slope. She stopped and made a sweeping gesture with her right arm—*this* is the place to build a new house with a view to the west of the Jemez Mountains. At the other end of the lot tucked in among the juniper and piñon trees was a 50-year-old New Mexican-style bungalow. On our quick walk-through we noted sagging

beams, stained carpet, ancient appliances and the faint smell of wood smoke and wet dog. Every inch of it needed renovation.

That night over dinner we debated our choices—a single-family home on a tidy street, a new townhouse behind a popular pottery market, or the rundown house in the woods. After dinner we set out to drive by the last property for another look, but couldn't find the dirt road in the dark. Back at the bed and breakfast we shivered and paused to gaze up at the full moon high overhead with a ring around it. We made an offer on the fixer-upper on the big lot with a view the next morning before catching our return flight to Texas.

Back to Houston, back to work. We didn't have the means or a plan yet to make a move to New Mexico. In March we visited for the first time since closing on the house. After landing in Albuquerque, we stopped for enchiladas and a margarita and then drove the 65 miles to Santa Fe. This time we found the dirt road without a problem and pulled into the driveway marked by a tall cottonwood that was near dead, although it would be months before we realized it. The squat, flat-roofed house didn't have an ounce of charm. The dumpalow, Dave called it. We pulled in under the carport and Dave jumped out to unload—suitcases, cots, and sleeping bags—ready to set up for the weekend. I reclined my seat and refused to get out of the car.

By late May the mother bear and her two cubs left their den. It was a tough time of year for the female who needed to protect her nursing cubs and look for food to replenish her depleted fat stores. After she found a sturdy tree and taught the cubs, each weighing about five pounds, to climb, she had a safe place for them to stay while she ventured off—not too far—to forage for grass and dandelions, to turn over rocks and logs on the hunt for ants and insects.

SouthWest Writers Anthology of Winning Entries

On our second visit, over Memorial Day weekend, my folks drove down from Denver to meet us. We had a new bed, our first piece of furniture, delivered shortly before they arrived. Dad brought his surveying equipment and we spent a chilly day in rain and sleet shooting elevations—Dad at the tripod, Dave toting the rod in the trees—getting a feel for the shape and contour of the long narrow lot that was now ours. Mom and I braved the kitchen with its chipped asbestos floor tile and plywood countertops to make pimento cheese sandwiches out of a jar.

After dinner in town, Dave lit a fire in the living room kiva and we pulled lawn chairs close, the house more endearing in firelight.

The subdivision, Colonia Solana, was created in the late 1940s in the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Back then the dirt road ended at our driveway. Four modest pumice block houses, covered with stucco in varying shades of brown had been built on one- to two-acre lots on the west side of the road. Prior owners had planted fruit trees and rose bushes, irises and lilacs. By the time we purchased the house, the road was cut through and climbed higher into the foothills where new homes were springing up every month.

In the fall of 1997 we made the move, thrilled to escape the endless humid summers, snarled traffic, and dull routine of corporate jobs. The little house overflowed with our furniture and unpacked moving boxes. We set up a makeshift office in the sunroom. Most of Dave's architectural consulting work would be out of state; Santa Fe would be our home base. No time to focus on a remodeling project, we improvised. Our three senior cats—Misha, Paris, Moet—each claimed a favorite spot. One perched on top of a stack of boxes, another snoozed on a sunny corner of a desk, the third napped in a tangle of blankets on the unmade bed.

I relied on a field guide to learn the names of birds that stopped by the platform feeders—weathered and warped scraps of plywood nailed on top of fence posts—outside our kitchen window: scrub jays, two kinds of towhees, chickadees, and flickers. Coyotes yipped and howled

at night, but we rarely saw them. I never suspected it, but a bear likely considered our yard part of its extended territory during the summer, passing through on the lookout for an easy meal.

The two bear cubs born in the winter of 1995 were now on their own. They had hibernated with their mother for a second winter, but she shooed them off early the next summer when she went looking for a mate. The female cub was allowed to stay close to her mother's territory, but the male was expected to move on. After their first summer alone—fattened up on acorns, chokecherries, and wild berries—they both dug dens and settled in for the winter.

We knew it was past time to start the renovation once we had to climb a ladder to shovel the flat roof every time it snowed. Dave drew up plans and hired a contractor who immediately demolished most of the roof structure. At the beginning of July, right on schedule, the monsoon season started. The crew of two guys would no sooner remove the blue tarp and set to work framing the parapet walls when black clouds would move in and the scent of rain would fill the air, often forcing them to unroll the tarp and call it a day.

Dave and I holed up in the second bedroom, as far from the construction as we could get, with our two remaining cats. We covered our bed each morning with a sheet of plastic. By the time the new millennium arrived, the dumpalow, now almost unrecognizable with its high ceilings and brand new kitchen, had been transformed into a cozy guest house. Warm and dry, we lifted a glass to welcome the New Year.

Early in the spring, after the winter weather had cleared, the contractor began the foundation for a new house. Nestled into the hill, it would have big windows facing west near the piece of ground where the realtor had stood five years earlier. For the better part of two years there was a crew on our lot. An ongoing commotion: the rumble of a concrete truck, the staccato thump of a nail gun, loud rock-n-roll from a beat-up radio.

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And then it went quiet. We moved into the new house with our cat Misha, just turned twenty. Birds sang outside our kitchen window, perched in a tall piñon tree. We saw mule deer, coyotes, and the occasional bobcat pass through the yard. It turned out the wildlife used the same natural pathway—visible from our breakfast nook—that we had widened and now used as a driveway. But never a bear. When a neighbor told me his bird feeder had been destroyed, I dismissed the idea that it was a bear although I had heard reports: a bear napping by the river not far from the Plaza spotted by tourists from a bridge, a mother with her cubs cruising through town prompting a school lock down. They ventured into residential neighborhoods for the crabapples and cherries rotting on the ground under fruit trees, a bag of dog kibble stored on the patio, a leftover slice of pizza tossed in the trash.

It was late in the summer and had been raining. A recent story on the radio reported a bear wandering along the river, about a mile downhill from us grazing the fruit trees. But still I was shocked to look out the back door one evening to find that the bird feeders had been mangled, the suet gone, cages in the mud, hinges bent beyond repair.

I called New Mexico Game and Fish to report the bear visit, not really sure what I expected them to do. The wildlife officer who returned my call was firm. No bird feeders in the summer. No trash outside before the morning of pickup day.

The bear came back every year. I learned to look and listen for the signs. Scat, of course. But also missing apples from one day to the next on the ground under a gnarled tree that rarely fruited. A midmorning commotion at a neighbor's collection of metal trashcans.

A few years later Dave was sketching the next phase of home improvements. Fences and walls. I agreed we needed them, but didn't want to inhibit animals from passing through the yard. His solution was a three-foot wide opening in the far corner of the back fence. Not visible from the house it gave our secretive wild neighbors access through a wooded area. A quick scoot across the gravel driveway and they could head on up the mountain. The new opening was the perfect place to set

my remote camera. Wary of surprising a bear I always made noise when I ventured into the trees, usually a rock in each hand banged together to mimic the ursine habit of popping its jaws to let others know where it is. After I set the automatic shutter, it didn't take long for the camera feed to be filled with pictures of skunks, raccoons, and rabbits.

Finally, on a September day, eighteen years after I stepped out of the realtor's SUV, I saw the bear. Not in person, but in a shot captured on my camera. Down on all fours, a fine-looking furry bear—more brown than black, rounded ears, pointy snout—walking through the opening in the fence. He had passed through in the morning, about the time I eat breakfast, but never made a sound.

October 2019

Once again it's calm at my house. The carpenters and stone masons have packed their tools and are long gone. The robins and thrashers don't get alarmed when I step outside to water the geraniums. A coyote has been coming to the birdbath to drink. On a Tuesday morning in August Dave found a pile of scat between the two houses near the apple tree. This time it was fresh, maybe from the night before. It was orange and filled with apricot pits, no discernible odor. We don't have an apricot tree, but one of our neighbors does.

I like to think the bear passing through the yard is the same one from year to year, probably a male since they travel more widely than the females. He has never harmed anything or caused any trouble. But early on I took to heart the advice of bear rehabilitator Benjamin Kilham who wrote “. . . [to] feed a bear intentionally or unintentionally—[one is] entering into a social contract with them.” In his book *Out on a Limb: What Black Bears Taught Me about Intelligence and Intuition* he goes on to say, “Once you start feeding bears, they expect the food to keep coming, and when you miss it even for one night, the bears might respond by damaging property as a means of punishment.”

It has also crossed my mind that maybe, just maybe, the bear that passes through here each summer and fall could be a bear born up on the mountain in 1995, the year we bought the dumpalow. It's possible, but not likely. Bears can live to an old age in the wild, up to twenty-five years, but it's rare once they come into contact with people. It starts with a hungry bear discovering an unwashed barbecue grill or a feeder filled with sunflower seeds and they're hooked. They keep coming back and, sooner or later, they run into a conflict with humans. If they are lucky and haven't been labeled a "nuisance bear" the game department will relocate them, often to a more remote area where it may be difficult to establish territory within an existing bear population. So once again the bear goes on the prowl looking for a meal, finding a campground trash bin overflowing with stinky scraps or a row of hummingbird feeders hung on the deck of someone's weekend cabin. In a conversation about black bears with NM Game and Fish biologist Rick Winslow, he told me, *"If you live in those wildland-urban interfaces you're going to have wildlife and if you complain about it, we don't have any choice but to do something about it. That usually ends up with a dead animal. Maybe not the first time, but the next time."*

It was a warm summer night and the bear had a stomach full of apples. He was lumbering across a two-lane street when he was startled by a flash of light. He heard a loud boom and felt a sharp pain. Voices in the dark, but they didn't see him, didn't yell at him. He kept moving and didn't stop until he found a cool, damp, dark spot.

Early in the fall Dave heard about a bear discovered by local residents in a culvert less than a mile away, between our house and the river. A wildlife officer came to investigate the report and euthanized the animal. Certain it was the same apricot-eating bear that had recently crossed our lot, I called NM Game and Fish and they confirmed the bear's death. It was a male, but his age was unknown. The bear had been hit by a car and was too seriously injured to be saved.

A Diversity of Expression

I mourned the loss of that bear and regretted that he suffered and died, however unintentionally, at the hands of humans.

Another year has passed, an unusual year with lots of time spent at home, more than in any of the previous twenty-five. I watched a pair of house finches attempt to build a nest behind a light fixture next to my back door and caught two does eating my yellow and purple pansies, not once but twice. I kept remote cameras pointed at the opening in the back fence and on the driveway and saw the usual coyotes and rabbits, but no sign of a bear.

What is it about bears that captivates us? Maybe we recognize something of ourselves in them, their curiosity and appetites. Maybe it's because they sometimes walk on their hind legs, leaving behind large tracks that resemble our own footprints. Bears and civilization are a dangerous mix, especially for the bears. But I liked knowing I was sharing my yard with a bear, especially after I learned to appreciate that it had been his long before I called it mine.

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