

Six Things My Father Taught Me About Bears

by Leah Mol

1.

I used to ask my dad what I was like when I was born. I asked him while we stood in line at the grocery store, or while we watched the news on TV, or while he double-checked that my seat belt was done up properly. His answer was always, "A bear."

I'd laugh and say, "What was I really like? What did I look like?"

"Just like a bear," he'd say. "No fur at all."

I'd laugh forever and he'd look at me like I was crazy, which just made me laugh even more. My dad was the perfect straight man. Other people didn't get him, but we always knew each other's lines.

2.

Dad was a mammalogist. It's just what it sounds like. He had this way of working in a fact anywhere. He did it at restaurants, the video store, parent-teacher conferences. The only mammals he didn't like to talk about were humans.

When I asked him questions about why people did things, or told him stories about the kids at school, he'd respond with animal facts. When I told him about Margaret G.'s parents getting a divorce, he told me beavers mate for life. When I asked him why people would kill themselves, he told me that lemmings don't actually throw themselves off cliffs the way everyone thinks they do.

When I told him I was starving, he told me Russian bears were digging up cemeteries and eating dead bodies. Their food supply had disappeared and they were desperate. He took a banana out of the bowl on the counter, peeled it from the bottom, and held it in front of my face. "That's starving," he said.

3.

We moved to Florida for a year when I was ten. I'd never lived anywhere other than home, and I hated Florida. I hated the heat, the way it got into your skin so you were always wet. It felt like we were always in the middle of a thunderstorm or a thunderstorm was about to start or a thunderstorm had just ended.

Dad couldn't understand why I hated it so much. He sat on porches with old men and drank rum runners. He left orange peels curling on the kitchen counters. He stopped wearing socks.

At home, I'd eat a snack at the kitchen table every day while he did the crossword. We spent nights in the living room, doing puzzles. We loved puzzles. In Florida, he met me outside after school and we'd go to someone's house. He'd sit on the porch with the men, and I'd sit in the kitchen with the wives and girlfriends and sisters and daughters. I'd drink Kool-Aid with double sugar and listen to them talk. That was the only part of Florida I liked, the way anyone talked about anything in front of anyone. A woman told a story about her daughter who'd been arrested because she left her baby locked up in a cabinet every time she went out to buy cigarettes. Another talked about when she had flesh-eating disease. She said she only had a cut, but her whole arm started to hurt deep down like her bone was

rotting. She wore long sleeves but pulled them up to show me her scars. They were like footsteps in snow, packed and dented.

I didn't want to make friends because I worried Dad would use it as an excuse to stay. In Florida, we weren't together the way we always had been. I asked him once if he wanted to stay forever. After I asked, I held my breath, told myself he'd say no as long as I didn't breathe before he answered. He told me that bears used to live in Africa and no one knows why they don't anymore. When he started talking about fossils, I gasped in, swallowing air and coughing, and he just stared at me before leaving the room.

One day, I came home from school and Dad wasn't there. He'd never not been there before, and I didn't know what to do. I went into my room and dumped all of my dolls out on the floor. Most of them were a mess; I liked to cut their hair and give them makeovers. Dad never noticed—I don't think he knew what they looked like when I got them. I lined them all up along the wall and took off my clothes and imagined each of them telling me how pretty I was. Dad still wasn't home after that, so I ran into the kitchen, grabbed a bag of peanuts and a carton of raisins, and ran back to my bedroom, my sweaty bare feet squeaking on the tile floor. I lay down and spread my hair out on the pillow and made faces at the posters on the ceiling while I ate all the peanuts and half the raisins.

I woke up to a crash in the kitchen and swearing from my dad, and I hurried under the covers and pretended to sleep. It was dark, late late. He didn't check on me but I heard him walk down the hall to his room.

The next morning, we ate ice cream for breakfast.

When we left Florida, I didn't bring anything with me. I left a box filled with Barbies doing the splits, kicking each other in the face. Another box with books about dinosaurs, fantasy worlds, babysitters. Costume jewellery and stuffed animals and magic tricks. It all reminded me of being somewhere I didn't belong.

4.

Dad was always good at things like ponytails and birthdays. He remembered what I didn't like to eat for lunch and which park was my favourite. He always let me choose the movie we rented on Saturdays. When I was little, he read to me every night before bed and rubbed my back to help me fall asleep. I think my mom would have been good at that stuff too; she just didn't know it. Once I asked him why she left and he told me female grizzly bears are responsible for their young. They're devoted and attentive and they stick around unless there's some reason they absolutely can't. He was cutting up an apple. I watched him quarter it, take out the core, and slice each piece in half. He took my favourite plate out of the cabinet, the one I made in kindergarten, even though it was on the bottom of the pile. I hadn't used it in a long time.

"The male bears are the ones who leave," he said, putting the plate down without looking at me. I grabbed a slice and chewed it for what felt like forever, the skin getting pulpy and sour in my mouth. He reached across the table and took a piece of apple off my plate.

I used to hate wearing winter boots because my pants would bunch up around my ankles and legs. It was better with tights, but even in those, if there was any bunching anywhere, I'd lose my mind. Once I was sitting on the bottom step of our staircase, crying with my face in my hands, because my tights were bunching around my little toe and no matter how smooth it seemed when my foot was shoeless, I could feel it happening as soon as I put on my boot.

My dad picked up my boot and threw it across the room, where it hit a table and knocked a glass over. He started to cry hard; I'd never seen any grown-up cry like that before. His face turned bright red.

When he turned back to look at me, I ran up the stairs with one boot on, my right foot heavy and clunking every other step, making my whole left side feel empty, so light it floated.

"I wish we were bears," I screamed before slamming my bedroom door.

5.

The first time I drank alcohol was in grade seven. I went to my friend Tracy's house, and we drank raspberry vodka in the basement while her brother had a party upstairs. We watched *The O.C.* and took sips right from the plastic bottle, plugging our noses and then wiping our tongues with a dishcloth.

Tracy and I had been friends since preschool. Her parents owned buildings and went on lots of trips. I don't know what they actually did, but they were always nice when they were there.

At one point, we snuck up to the top of the stairs and watched the older kids

through the crack in the basement door. We could see into the kitchen, where a girl was making out with a guy against the fridge. Their tongues moved in and out of each other's mouths, and he kept putting his hand up her shirt, over and over.

"Let's go back down," Tracy whispered. "This is boring."

"You're just scared."

Tracy always said things were boring if she was too nervous to do them. She said she was bored a lot.

"If they see us, it'll be weird."

I'm not scared of anything, I told myself.

Tracy turned away from me and I thought she was going to leave, but she kept sitting beside me on the top step while I looked through the small opening.

The guy at the fridge put his hand up the girl's shirt again and this time she just left it there.

Tracy passed out around two in the morning. I got a glass of water from the bathroom sink and when I got back, Tracy's brother was standing beside the couch where she was sleeping, just looking at her. I stood there for what felt like minutes but probably wasn't that long. When he moved his hand to touch her, I stepped sideways along the wall so he could see me. He pulled his hand back and turned to face me, just staring but like he didn't really see me. He didn't look like the boy who fixed my bike tire when I was eight, or the boy who taught Tracy and me to swallow spaghetti and pull it back out of our throats. He wavered a little like his body was

made of nothing, like he was just skin filled with air, and then he took a step toward me.

I couldn't move back; I was already against the wall. I thought about what you're supposed to do if you see a bear. "Listen to me," I said. "Listen. I'm a person."

He looked a little like he might fall over, and then he looked at my eyes instead of my body. "You're so fucking weird sometimes," he said, and then he turned and went up the stairs.

Tracy was still sleeping, her mouth open, a spot of drool on her pink pillow.

I called Dad in the morning and he came to pick me up. He asked me how it went and I said it was fine. We drove past the dry cleaner's where Dad always dropped off his ties, the Chinese restaurant where we ate on Thursdays, my elementary school.

I put my head back against the headrest and closed my eyes. I could feel the hot air from the car heaters on my face and it made me sleepy and a little nauseous, but I didn't shut the grille. "What was I like when I was born?"

"Just like a bear," he said. "Could hardly believe it."

When we pulled into the driveway, we sat there in the heat of the car for a minute, just breathing.

6.

"A group of bears is called a sloth."

"How many is a group?" I asked.

"Two or more," he said.

“Are we a group?”

“I guess we are.”

“What are we called?”

I don't remember his answer, but I remember his forehead was sweaty, so it was probably summer. Maybe we were in Florida.

A party. A convoy. A clique. A team. A family.