

Mr. Finnegan and the Bear
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for my grandchildren and those to follow

"Yes, Grandpa John used to say that the depression of today is worse than the depression of his day," Ipokni spoke as she rocked that fussing baby, patting him softly on his back. "I guess he's right because when I was growing up I always had a bed to sleep in and a table full of food."

"Who is Grandpa John?" she asked the sleeping baby. "Well, he was my great grandfather," she laughed to herself. "That's just a little before your time."

The grandmother and the baby rocked in silence for awhile. The baby on her shoulder began to squirm and fuss a bit. "OK, I'll tell you a story about a time when your daddy didn't have his own bed to sleep in. We were so poor we didn't have a 'pot to pea in' as Grammie would say."

It was another grasshopper summer in the sun-washed apple mountains of middle New Mexico. But for your daddy James, it was the worst summer ever. That summer I was out of work, and we didn't have any place to live. We slept in a small dome tent in the mountains.

"I'll never forget because no one would help us out. It seems like when trouble comes, it separates us from all our friends. There was a time when our people helped each other out. Now, we're all scattered like ragweed by the wind. No, my little one, it was a long way from the red desert of your daddy's people, Diné. "

At that time, it was just the three of us--me, your daddy, and your Uncle Matthew, and Mr. Finnegan, of course. Mr. Finnegan was definitely the best dog who ever lived. He really knew how to be a dog. James really loved that little dog. Most of the time, when I had to drive into town to look for work, Matthew and James stayed in the mountains.

"I think only Mr. Finnegan always wanted to play with your daddy. Your daddy was just a little boy then, you know. He was always precious to me because I lost the one before him."

Well, Mr. Finnegan and James took long walks together through the cool forest. They looked for frogs together in the little stream. They chased Deer. They laid in the cool fragrance of mint in a mountain meadow. James spent endless hours collecting and drying mint for tea.

"Yeah, your daddy was always a wonder that way. Life was full of discovery, and he insisted on sharing every little insight with his brother and me. It almost drove Matthew nuts. You know he's the strong silent type."

The days were mostly lazy and fun. James really liked staying in the mountains. He could play all day and not have to take a bath at night. He could chew fresh mint until his tongue stung. Mostly he

hated the nights. They were cold, dark, and a little scary. There were no other people for miles around, and no bright street lights to push back the darkness.

Every night we crawled into our sleeping bags inside that little bitty dome tent. We were so crowded that there wasn't even room to turn over. Mr. Finnegan always slept curled up on James' pillow. Worst of all, for James, was that it was so dark that no one could read him a bedtime story.

"I never saw a child who loved to read like your daddy did. Lord, he sure did love it!"

One night we had some excitement. A very loud thump woke us up. Outside our tent we heard something rustling crumpled paper and empty cans in the trash dumpster at our campsite. Mr. Finnegan stood stiff-legged at the tent door, growling low. James sat up in his sleeping bag, but he couldn't see a thing in the darkness.

"What was that?" he asked.

"Sh-h-h! Some kind of animal. Hush Finnegan!" I whispered back.

Further away, we heard more thumping.

"What kind of animal?" James asked, sleepily.

"I don't know. Maybe a raccoon," I answered, trying not to think of any other possibilities. "Go back to sleep. It sounds like it's going away."

Mr. Finnegan and James could not go back to sleep for a long time. James lay awake in his fear, listening to Matthew snore. "Brother, doesn't anything ever wake him," he wondered to himself. All night Mr. Finnegan growled low in his sleep.

We all took a walk the next morning to figure out what kind of animal had visited our camp. All up and down that dirt road dumpsters had been overturned. Garbage was spread everywhere.

James said, "Raccoons can't overturn dumpsters."

It was a warm, sunny Sunday, and we didn't think anything else about the events of the night before. All morning we played and read stories together. After lunch, Mr. Finnegan began barking. We all ran out of the tent to find a Black Bear rummaging the garbage. Matthew ran toward it.

"You know, that boy never did have good sense. I used to tell him that he had 'the sense that God gave a goose.' If you've ever met a goose, you know about how much that is." Gently, Ipokni lowered the baby to her lap, placing him gently on his stomach. One little arm spilled over the side.

"Yeah, I reckon, I've never met a better dog ever. Everybody said so." Ipokni began to rub the baby's back.

"You see, my little one, that was a bad summer for bears, too. Poor, old things were so hungry that they were wandering all the way into the city and getting run over by cars. You know that in our way, Bear and People are related. Anyway, that summer we shared a lot with our cousin Bear. Too much, your daddy might say." Ipokni laughed to herself as she brushed that soft baby hair.

That night James insisted that we all sleep in the van. But even in the van, James never felt safe. That encounter with the bear had definitely taken the fun out of being homeless. It was only months later when I had another job, and we had a house to sleep in that James slept soundly. As for Mr. Finnegan, he always slept right next to the door just in case any stray bears tried to get in.

Ipokni laughed quietly as she lifted the now limp baby from her lap to put him in a crib. "Now, don't you go worrying about no bears. Ipokni's going to make sure you never have to live out of a van." Gently and firmly, she tucked in her sleeping grandbaby.