



The Three Starving Bears

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Animals, Retold Fairy Tales

5 min read

They had been hunting all day.

They would go hungry again tonight.

The beginnings of an eternal darkness pressed down over the land. The days grew shorter and the air was churned with a deep-set chill. Dusk settled over the arctic plains, the blush sun disappearing below the horizon. Streaks of powdered pink and lavender stained the sky, plush clouds drifting above the frozen sea. The soft, icy surface reflected the colours on a melting mirror.

Papa Bear lounged in the downy snow beside Mama Bear, who had her snout buried beneath her paw. A salty breeze ruffled their limp fur, which was still a sickly yellow even though summer had come and gone. It had been a hard season. Their dark skin hung from their thin bodies, ribs pressing against stretched membranes. A small arctic fox keenly watching the movements of the cub from a frozen mound. Baby Bear loomed above a seal's breathing hole, shoving his nose into the water below. The sea ice bent under his paws. He stretched his legs to either side, redistributing his weight, and shuffled around the opening.

"You're doing it wrong," Papa Bear rumbled. "If there were any seals, you would have scared them away."

Baby Bear threw his head back and whined. “Well, there aren’t any here. There aren’t any anywhere.”

“Practise right, and you might catch something someday.”

Baby Bear whined again. “I’m so hungry,” he grumbled, and sniffed heavily. Some loose snowflakes swirled into his nose. He sneezed. It shook his small body, and he fell back onto his rump.

Mama Bear chuckled. The growling laughter died away. She rolled over and looked up at her mate. “We might have to go to the carcass,” she said.

The haggard male shook his head and stretched. “I wouldn’t take you there unless we had no other choice.”

“We don’t have any other choice,” she said.

Papa Bear licked his lips. “Any bears within a twenty-mile radius will be drawn there,” he said. “It’ll be a bloodbath. It’s not safe.” He narrowed his eyes and looked up at the sky, watching the glittering orb disappear below the icy plain. He drew courage from one of the last glimpses of sunlight. “I think we should leave.”

The female stilled. Her lips pulled back from her maw, teeth flashing in the fading light for a mere moment.

“We are not leaving,” she snapped, her voice sharp. “I told you not to bring this up again.”

Her mate turned his body away from their cub, creating a barrier to keep their words concealed. “I can’t watch us starve for much longer. I wish I could share in your optimism, but it’s based on a fool’s hope. I cannot overlook the reality of the situation.”

“You can leave if you want to,” Mama Bear said. A will of iron kept her voice from wavering. “Take our son, if you must. I’m staying right here, though.”

“He’s not coming back,” he said.

“You don’t know that,” she said. “How can you say that?”

Papa Bear thought of the two cubs they had been blessed with. Now only one remained. "It's been two months since he disappeared," he said. "We've scoured the land, and there's no sign of him. What with the increased hunts by the local tribes..."

Mama Bear jumped to her feet. "He'll come back," she said. "I know it." She prowled off to where Baby Bear rolled in the snow. She lifted him onto his feet by the scruff of his neck, and padded across the ice. "Are we going to the carcass or not?" she called.

The three bears made the long trek back along the frozen sea to the dirty, frost-covered coast surrounded by mountains dusted in winter's tears. The lengthy night was close. Darkness shrouded the earth, with the last shreds of light clinging to what life they could latch onto. The jagged headland jutted into the snow, the cliffs growing larger as they approached. The arctic fox shadowed their movements, keeping some distance between them.

The rotting bowhead whale carcass lay on the beach. Its meat had been pulled apart, dark carrion hanging off large bones. Yellow masses appeared around either end, blood staining their snouts. A swarm of vultures lingered on the rocks nearby, watching and waiting for the predators to leave after they had indulged themselves. The two scarred males growled a warning as the family approached. The three bears took off without so much as a mouthful.

It wasn't worth the risk.

Papa Bear led them over the rough and rocky hills to the tundra. The ashy landscape, normally speckled with maroon and brown vegetation in all directions, was now covered in a white blanket. In the lead up to winter, the lakes crystallized, particle by particle. The ice cracked and rattled. The water cried out for the snow to protect it from the cold. Frozen streams wound through the land with small frost flowers blooming and then melting on transparent surfaces.

Touches of winter festering on the tundra seeped into the thick, pine forest. Baby Bear lolloped along, chasing the fox that nipped his fur when he wasn't looking, snapping at it when it caught his skin. Papa Bear padded through the woods with Mama Bear lagging behind. A few lone birds who had yet to migrate took off in a flurry of snow and feathers.

Baby Bear yelped, and lunged at the fox. It sped off before his maws could latch onto its tail. He swallowed hard, then slunk over to his parents. "I'm hungry," he said. "Are there any berries?"

"There are some oats at home, dear," Mama Bear said. "We can have them."

"The emergency oats?" the cub mused.

His question was met with silence. There was no need to worry him.

No need at all.

As they drew closer to the cottage, Mama Bear stopped in her tracks and lifted her nose high into the air. She inhaled deeply, her exhale misting around her face. "Can you smell that?" she whispered. Her mouth fell open slightly.

"No." Papa Bear stood over a rabbit's burrow, with his cub reaching his paw into the hole, flexing his claws, clutching at nothing but dirt and air. He looked back at his mate. "What is it?"

"It's him," she said. "He's come home!" She sprinted off.

"Stay close to me," he said to his son. They ran after her.

Mama Bear slowed when she reached the house. She let out a gentle whine, and eased her way inside. The room was empty, save for three wooden chairs, and a dinner table that was often empty. Atop the chipped surface sat three ceramic bowls filled with porridge. One of the seats lay in splintered pieces. The bowls were half-eaten.

“My baby,” she cooed. “Where are you?” She lifted her snout again. Her attention fell on the room upstairs. Just as Papa Bear and Baby Bear entered, she clambered up the stairs, her long strides taking them two at a time.

She pushed her paw against the door which sat slightly ajar. The soft sounds of slumber settled through the chamber. The three beds were unkept and messy, the covers of two thrown back to reveal plain mattresses beneath. The other was tucked around a bundle that steadily rose and gently fell. White fur poked out from under the blanket.

Tears burned in the back of Mama Bear’s eyes. She blinked them away and reached out to peel back the covers. “My baby,” she whispered, her voice raw. “I knew you’d come back to me.”

The bundle of fur rolled over.

A human girl wearing her son’s skin as a cloak blinked at the sudden disturbance. “Nanuk!” the child with the golden hair screamed.

Mama Bear threw back her head and roared.

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