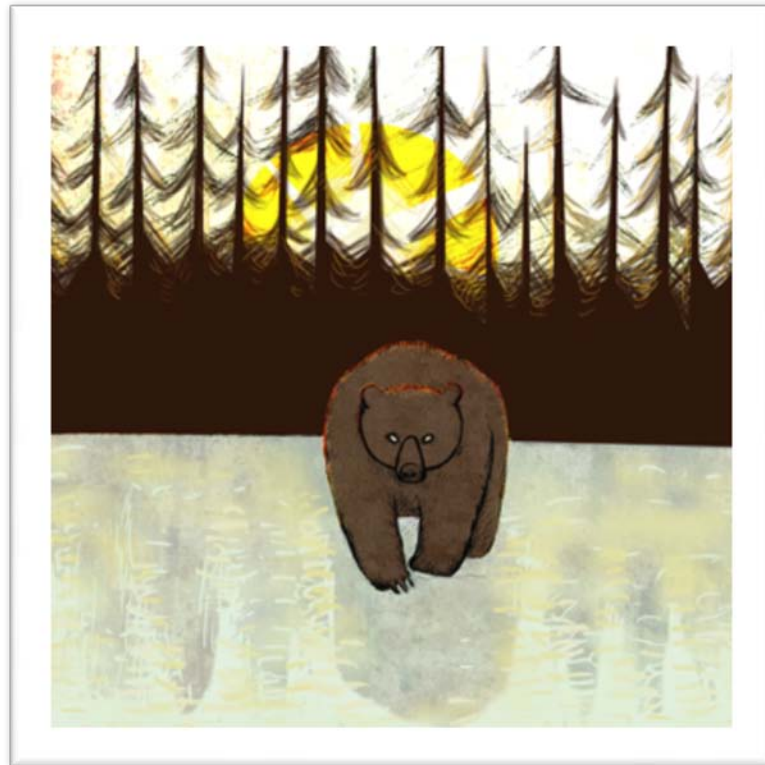




THE BEAR



The Bear

We left our two snowmobiles, crossed a frozen river that I knew wouldn't carry the vehicles with my brother-in-law Errol weighing 340 stripped and riding his twelve year-old stepson, Sean, my sister's kid by her first husband. I led the way shouldering my Winchester 70, Sean with a 22 rifle, his legs spread wide trying to keep in my snowshoe tracks, and Errol with a Savage 110.

We checked traps. Two snares were empty and one of the spring loaders had a small hind leg in the clamp claws but something had ripped off the body.

"Coyote did it," Errol said.

"Bigger than that," I said.

We began to circle back to the rigs. Sean's 22 discharged.

"I'm hit" Errol moaned to scare the kid.

Sean started to cry. He didn't think good and had no schooling.

Errol slapped him on the back of the head. "Grow up," he said. "I was joking."

Sean stood. "Bear," he said pointing to the edge of the clearing. The sun was low and the shadows long over the snow cover, and the trees in the forest seemed welded together.

"He's big," Errol said.

Sean fired a shot. The bear reared back on his haunches.

"He's government protected. You hurt him, the boogie man put you in jail."

The bear had dropped on all fours and was walking toward us in a squiggle line.

"Let's move." Errol said and broke into a run. But Sean fell. I stopped. Earl reached his rig and took off. I got the kid standing.

"Don't run," I said. "But move fast." We only had a hundred feet to go when the bear hit full stride on all fours.

We mounted, and I got the rig moving, Sean straddling a gas can.

We caught up to Errol.

"You left the kid," I said.

Errol shrugged. "He's your blood kin," he said, "not mine."

A cloud cover rolled in and we had to camp early. We rigged a nine-foot high platform on four sturdy pines for me and Errol to sleep. Within reaching distance, I strung a hammock high up for Sean.

The moon reflected pewter patches of light on the snow. We were unable to sleep. After midnight we heard limbs cracking. The bear was on us. Errol reached for his gun but his weight shifted, and he tumbled to the ground, his gun trapped under him. The bear tore at him. Errol screamed, then gurgled a moan. Then nothing.

"He going to eat us?" Sean asked.

I could see the whites of the bear's eyes, his snout slashed with Errol's blood. He swatted at us with his claws and the platform rocked. I clutched a tree trunk and looked for a gun.

The bear turned from Errol and roared. The kid whimpered. I needed a distraction. I unsheathed my knife and cut the rope to the kid's hammock thinking he'd be a momentary diversion. He fell. "Run," I yelled.

But the bear caught the kid in the air. The kid screamed but was silent by the time I shinnied down the farthest pine and ran for my rig.

I drove twenty miles and dismounted at the top of a ridge. First light painted me with warmth I knew was imagined. In minutes the sun broke the horizon, blood red with an orange halo, and the distant cloud underbellies turned purple. I'd never seen such beauty.

"Thank you, dear God," I yelled as the sun exploded into the sky. I was alive. I was special. "You the man," I yelled to the heavens. My echo faded. Behind me, a coyote howled in the landscape. Then I heard the cracks of a dead tree limbs . . . something big, something heavy.