

The Bear and Me

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Grief is too present in my life. I have to start writing this story or die. I am not sure how I will die. Several possibilities come to mind but none with any guarantee of success. I have been finding it increasingly easy to locate the carotid artery in my neck. Seems simple. I will only need the blade from my pink BIC and a few moments of resolute determination. But then I see the face of Marie. She lay on the cold gray cement outside my cell. From behind grim bars I stood a frozen watch as the blood oozed from the gory slashes on her neck. She did not die. Marie was put in steel shackles. She bled a lot until a nurse could be found. Trusting her death to a BIC did not work.

Hanging, from what I hear, is messy and despite determination, death not a given. Johnny's long-lingering coma is grim witness to this fact. I suppose none of us survive long without some sense of hope. For those entombed behind tonnes of concrete and steel of the Kingston Prison for Women ("P4W"), the most fragile fragment of hope is incredibly precious. Johnny's fragment dissolved. She was a warrior woman who decided to hang to death but failed. For months she was held by the cruel threads of a mindless coma until death finally came. I do not trust hanging. But Johnny is also connected to Pat Bear and hence to my story.

The first time I saw Pat, or her feet, was at the Regional Treatment Centre ("RTC"). She was wrapped in a blue blanket sitting on a ledge in front of an ice covered window. From under the blanket peaked two of the tiniest feet I have ever seen on an adult. They were so small they looked as if they belonged to a child rather than a young woman. Could have been size three but I suspect they were even smaller than that. I had been in my cell when she arrived. Now I had a chance to find out who this new person was. I said, "Hi, I'm Jo-Ann. How come they sent you over to these dungeons?" She smiled sort of shyly and said, "I'm Pat Bear. I guess they just got tired of me over there." I sure liked her smile and I just blurted out, "I bet they sent you here because your feet are too small to walk up and down all those tunnels and stairs at P4W. You came here to give your feet a rest!" Well that just set Pat off laughing and laughing. She was laughing so hard she could barely talk but she finally gasped, "Jo-Ann, you're a comical woman." This short conversation set the tone for happy and comfortable familiarity.

When I asked Bear where she was from, she replied, "Out West." Since we were in Kingston I asked her, "Do you mean west like from Toronto?" "Oh, no! I've never been to Toronto! I mean west. West like the prairies." I sort of remembered some stuff about the prairies from distant days of school geography but I was totally ignorant of the fact that while Pat's distance from her geographic home could be measured in miles, the distance from her cultural roots was immeasurably further. Probably because of our mutual loneliness we came to a meeting of hearts rather than minds. Simply by accident, I had stumbled upon a fundamental most dear to Cree social life, humour.

It was a good thing that we could warm our hearts with each other's company. For at the RTC the only treatment was January's freezing weather whining through the ancient windows of Kingston Penitentiary. I recall a female guard commenting that she wished she had worn her fur coat into work. This comment was made as she stood outside the cell of a woman left naked except for a house blanket type of nightie. The grim offense for which this woman, Lisa, was being punished was that she was refusing to eat. Treatment also included the drilling of jack hammers as cement blocks and bars were rearranged to accommodate more female prisoners. We were the ones who had broken down at P4W. We were transferred across the street to old Kingston Penitentiary ("KP"). I seriously wondered how the Correctional Service treated more critically distressed women.

At that time KP was notorious for housing Canada's worst sex offenders. I am not sure what disturbed me more; the drilling noise making cells smaller and smaller or the thought of being a female hostage in a prison of 400 men. I did not understand how deeply Pat was affected by being separated from her Cree society but I know these experiences were separating me from any sense of social decency existing in Canada. I do not know how far Pat shared the grim projections of my mind but she sure shared the same chilling temperatures and the same numbing noise.

When we were let out of cells to socialize on our concrete doorstep, I always greeted Bear with a little gasp of surprised astonishment and say, "Wow, you STILL have those tiny feet; they haven't grown at all!" Since they really did fit rather well with the rest of her compact body, Bear was constantly amused at my astonishment. Her laugh at my fool-

ishness was a chuckle that suited her equally well. She would usually grin and tell me I was just being silly.

However, one day to her “stop being silly comment,” she added the threat, “or I’m going to get you!” And there she stood armed with a chunky square of thickly iced chocolate cake. This rare treat had appeared on our supper trays. One thing, for sure, was the guys serving the food line always tried to give us something special like the biggest pieces or an extra bit of fruit. They seemed to really feel for our isolation.

Well! There stood Pat with a wicked, lively grin on her face dabbing her fingers into the gooey icing. Before I had time to really take in the scene she had plunked a huge gob of icing smack on my nose. This was a declaration of war! Clutching my blanket, I whipped in and out of my cell for my chocolate treasure. I totally forgot my plan to save it for a night time munchie. Yelling back, “I’ll get you,” I ran after Pat who was running for a hideout in the mildewed shower room. Suddenly she stopped, turned, gave a whoop and lunged at me with two sticky, black cake covered hands. Laughing and screaming in return, I broke off a chunk of cake and threw it at her. My pitch caught her square in the forehead. Pat now came to a full halt. One mucky hand went up and she slowly pulled the chunk off her face and stuffed it in her mouth. She was laughing so hard she nearly choked. I laughed with her until my sides were aching. What a sight we must have made. The guards had come onto the unit after hearing our yelps but they looked more stunned than angry at the sight of our light-hearted cake fight exploding within the confines of a maximum security prison.

As I look back and consider not only the nightmare quality of our surroundings but also a span of twenty years between our ages, the amount of playful laughter we shared was truly amazing. And there was also the matter of cultural difference. Bear was a young native woman from the prairies. I was an eastern white. Somehow our spirits were joyfully joined in small ways and we eased each other’s time at the RTC.

Neither of us stayed there a long time. Only a couple of months. In the way of women serving federal sentences a few months is not a remarkable amount of time. We both returned to P4W where over months and years our paths crossed but never intertwined so intensely. I would see Pat hanging out with Johnny from time to time and I was glad she had another pal. But I knew that a special bond had been

formed between the two of us and it was easily recognized by others; probably because we continued to laugh so easily when we ran into each other.

I guess I became more stable or appeared to be so. Pat did less well in keeping up appearances. It seems to me she became a victim to competing ideologies. One month she would meet with visiting Native Elders and they would encourage her to use traditional healing medicines like smudging with Sweet grass or Sage and going to a Sweat Lodge when this was occasionally possible. The next month Pat would see a white male psychiatrist who would give her his medicine bundle of anti-psychotic pills. She found no relief in this cross-over of treatments. I have been told that in former days, Pat had had a problem with solvent sniffing. She now seemed to return to this behaviour in some attempt at alleviating her turmoil. Her situation was fairly common knowledge but no more effective action seems to have been taken on her behalf.

One day the guards called me to talk to Pat. She did not want to leave her cell and was very upset. This time we could not laugh. Pat was about to be set free. She felt terribly dislocated and unwanted. She had nowhere to go. I could not console her. The guards just took her away to the harsh isolation of segregation, for her own protection. Shortly thereafter, the doors of P4W finally opened to Bear. She was turned out to Kingston and after a few days hung herself to death in a city park.

I was walking down a prison tunnel when I overheard guards talking about her death. My reaction was, at first, disbelief. Then, the next day I saw a very brief mention of her name in *The Whig Standard*, Kingston's daily paper. I felt incredibly helpless, wishing I could have done more and left knowing so little. Pat died outside the prison walls so no one from the prison acknowledged any responsibility for her death. I was never to know what became of her body or where she was laid to rest. But I do know I have continued to carry her in my heart.

It was not that long after Bear's death that Johnny attempted to suicide. Actually this became an era for a large number of suicides at P4W. I managed to survive through seven years inside but in attempting to live I feel I am joined by spirits of sisters who have chosen a different path. The power of their examples has moved the once remote thought of a suicidal death into the range of common place. For me it is a good thing that the echos of Bear's happy laughter still linger in my soul.