

CURSE OF THE BEAR PAW

By N.E Moone

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I never understood why my father brought it home with him. I was entering college at the time and the week before I departed on my seven-hour car ride to Main, my dad went on a hiking trip to one of our state parks. I often went with him as a child, but I didn't really have the time or the want, to spend an entire weekend out in the forest before uprooting my entire livelihood. I remember him walking through the front door that Monday, he had quite the sunburn on him and he had this big smile on his face. Maybe because he knew it would freak out Mom or because of the nature of it, but as we greeted him, he had in his outstretched hand a zip lock bag. And in that bag, was a small collection of bones.

Mom screamed and immediately started cursing him out for bringing a biohazard into the home. He winked at me as he tried to calm Mom down and asked me, "Know what this is son?" I shook my head, I was going to school for Physical Therapy which is where I believe his excitement came from. "This is a genuine fossilized bear paw,"

He shook the baggie at me. I took the corner of the bag carefully between my fingertips. It looked about like what you'd expect, it wasn't

complete though. There were three small digits attached to what would have been the base of the paw. The bear wasn't that old, the paw was smaller than my hand. It had a unique yellow color and looked very porous with small indents covering its surface. It gave off an aura of only what I could describe as strangeness.

"How do you know this is from a bear," I asked him.

He went on to describe all of his self-taught knowledge of how the ends of the digits ended with a sharper point showing that it had claws and how the density of it would correspond with the weight of a heavy animal. I could tell that my mom and I were both listening without much confidence in what he was saying.

He moved on, ignoring our glances at one another, and started to show us the few photos that he took, he made sure to stop to get the photos printed before coming home. He showed us the waterfall where he found the paw in the first place and the campsite he made for himself. Soon after some more rambling, that was the end of it.

We moved on and he placed the paw in his office, keeping it hidden in his trunk until he could get a display for it. My mother, father, and brother all tried to enjoy the last few days that I would be home. There was a sadness in the air that loomed over our heads with each passing day but even still, that was the greatest week of my life with my family. I'd do anything to go back to that week, to stop my father from ever going out in the first place.

I drove off to Maine a week later with a tearful goodbye from all of them. I was excited, there was my whole future ahead of me at that very moment. I didn't know it would come tumbling down.

A few months later, I received a call from my dad around 2:30 in the morning. I jolted awake at the sound of my ringtone going off, I lived in a solo room so I didn't have to worry about waking up a roommate. My brother was in the hospital. They weren't sure if he was going to make it. Immediately, I grabbed my things and jumped in my car right away. It was a miracle that I made it home safely after speeding for nearly seven hours straight.

When I arrived at the hospital, I was a total wreck after the drive. But even so, I should have been able to recognize my brother. They didn't know what happened to him, but the doctors assumed that he was a victim of a hit and run. His face was a broken, blown-up mess. His legs...the doctors said that if he made it through tonight they'd have to amputate. It was as if he fell multiple stories, which just simply wasn't possible. My parents woke to the sound of someone smashing his bedroom window and found him outside on the lawn. He wasn't even supposed to be out that night, he was still in his pajamas. He'd had issues with drugs in the past so maybe he was going to pick up or meet a dealer...it was useless trying to think of what could have happened.

He took his final breath just a few hours later. Mom and Dad were never the same after that.

We had a service for him shortly after. His casket had to be closed for obvious reasons. I stood in line receiving apology after apology from friends and family. Everything was just, harder at that point. My grades started to slip, I became reclusive, staying in my dorm room and sleeping the days away. I wasn't sure if I would be able to complete college. Mom stopped working and well, Dad was, Dad. He kept trying to move on, but what do you do when your wife is stuck living in grief?

I was able to finish my first year by nothing but sheer willpower, I was looking forward to being home for the summer. But any hope that came with that thought quickly dashed away. Home was...different. It was quiet. Having one less person in the house made things all too bare, now, we didn't have the biggest house. But mom was holed up in her room every day, dad was either out at work or out doing whatever hobby he picked up that week. I was upset at him for just giving up on Mom the way he did but after a few weeks of being home, I couldn't entirely blame him. The heart of our family seemed to disappear just like the person who took my brother's life. We stopped expecting to find any answers and could only try and deal with the pieces that were left behind.

Then the nightmares came. They were simple at first. I could smell the trees around me and could remember vague flashes of my surroundings. I

didn't lose much sleep until they started to take on more of a shape. I'd wake up to my heart thundering in my chest and sweat would soak through my clothes enough for my sheets to be wet. I couldn't tell if I was screaming in my dream or the real world. I would wake up feeling pinned to the bed unable to do anything. There was this immense pressure bearing down on me, even breathing became difficult. It was like I-I was drowning.

I didn't tell my family about it, my mom would ignore me and my dad well, a camping trip won't solve anything. I dropped out of school before my second year even started, I couldn't commit to living hours away and my dad clearly needed help paying for bills. Mom was slowly starving away, spending her days in the bedroom staring out the window.

I tried to convince Dad to call someone, or do something but he had his own issues. More often than not he would be out, somewhere. He'd say he was camping yet each time I looked in the garage the tent and all of our camping equipment were still there. I started to assume he had a mistress or, I don't know. A child shouldn't be seeing his father in this way. Things only got worse that summer. Mom went missing. I called the cops and told them how she barely left her room, she didn't have friends. The police weren't impressed by the state of the house. I was busy working five days a week and on the days I was home well, needless to say, I didn't have the energy or the want to take care of my parent's house. It had been a year since I dropped out and I grew numb to the lack of parental care. The police

took me in to get some information about Mom and it was easy to tell they didn't trust what I was telling them. I'd be lucky to get four hours of sleep a night, I could barely recognize myself. My face was gaunt and sunken in, I felt and looked like a walking skeleton.

My father and I were their only suspects and I couldn't even blame them. My family was a mess and everything I told them just made it worse. I was honestly relieved to have spent the night in the station, I wasn't under arrest so one of the officers let me lay down on a couch in the backroom for the night. It was the best rest I've gotten all year. No nightmares of the forest or drowning. Just a stark blackness that lasted until I was woken up by someone shaking my shoulder.

They'd found Mom and took her to the hospital, for some god-forsaken reason she was nearly fifteen miles from home in was found face down in a lake. I was driven over there but by the time I arrived... I'm sure she had nothing to say to me anyway. I can't remember the events that unfolded afterward. I was in shock, all I wanted to do was stop existing. Dad was still nowhere to be found and now the police were looking for him. I didn't know what else to live for now. I've been busting my ass to keep a roof over our heads, I gave up my dreams, my future. All for what? To be left with my dead mother's medical bills? I was lucky that some distant cousin was willing to take care of the funeral for me but I was broken.

When I went home, it was early in the morning. The sun was just barely rising. I stood at the front door for, God knows how long. My mind was blank, my stomach was aching from the lack of food and my dry heaving. For a second, I almost expected my brother to be there. I finally stepped foot into the house and truly saw the state of ruin it was in. Trash was littered everywhere, cobwebs were in every corner. It was a crypt for my family and I was the only one standing in it. I could hardly leave the living room, but I looked in all the rooms. I didn't have the heart to witness the downfall of my family, or my life.

My feet eventually led me to the last room of the house, my dad's office. The double doors were still closed from the last time he was in there which was. I don't know how many months now. The golden handles glinted in what light seeped through the curtains in the hallway. It was like staring at the sun. I felt like I couldn't open the door but before I could second guess myself I quickly pushed the handles and the doors opened. They slammed open and bounced back against the wall.

I felt a huge weight come off my shoulders and I took a deep breath to fill my lungs. The rancid stench of death burnt the hairs in my nose, If I wasn't as far gone as I was I knew that I would have thrown up then and there. I didn't even bother to wrinkle my nose as I stepped into the room. There was a fine layer of dust on everything but besides that, it was the cleanest room in the house. I assumed that a raccoon or something must

have died in the walls or attic. Despite the smell, everything was as I remembered.

As I threaded through the room, the smell only got worse. I did my best to follow the scent as awful as it was. I walked behind my father's desk where it immediately became worse. It didn't seem to be coming from the ceiling. I got on my knees, thinking it was coming from the floorboards. It was coming from behind me.

I turned around to face the trunk that belonged to my dad. I won't lie to you, I was freaked out. I didn't know what he could have put in there. There wasn't a lock on it, just a simple latch, I reached over and flicked it open. The smell stopped at once. There didn't seem to be anything special on the surface layer, there were some old books and photo albums from when I was younger. I took a moment to pick one up and flip through it, it wasn't long before I regretted that decision. There was a photo from 2010 during Christmas and all of us were there smiling into the camera, my brother looked so young, and mom was gussied up despite it being around 8 in the morning. I closed the album as a tear dropped down onto the page.

I shuffled through the trunk more finding old bills, birth certificates, and passports. Then I stumbled across a ziplock bag, one that was all but forgotten from my memory. I picked it up and stared long and hard at what rested inside. The bear paw that my father brought home with him before I

went to college. It didn't look like it aged a day, the bone fragments were still together.

There was a sudden rush of wind, carrying the scent of rain with it. I had no clue where it could be coming from the windows were closed. Trees creaked loudly against the brute force my hair was whipping all around like I was caught in the middle of a tornado. A sharp ringing deafened me, I dropped the paw to the ground and covered my ears but that didn't do anything. I collapsed to the floor waiting for this horrid event to end, closing my eyes like that would hide me from what was happening. As suddenly as it started, it stopped. Picture frames fell to the floor and the stuff that covered the desk dropped around me. I slowly opened my eyes, afraid of what I'd see. To my luck, there was nothing. Then I turned around and for the briefest second, there was something, someone standing over me. As soon as I blinked, the bones dropped in front of me and the figure was gone. The rotten stench of decay returned once again.

I picked up the bones, the baggie they were in was gone, and as I held them they seemed to... they seemed to be holding on. I rushed out of the office and ran straight to the garage. I grabbed my dad's hiking bag and started to fill it with stuff I would need for my journey, a flashlight plenty of spare batteries, food, and drink. I felt like I knew exactly what I had to do. I wrapped the paw...the hand, in a handkerchief, and stowed it away in the bag. I held my breath as I stepped into the house one last time, and went to

the living room where my dad had hung up the photos he took that day. I nicked the photo of the waterfall and rushed back outside, I couldn't stand to be in that place any longer.

The drive to the state park was only about an hour, but it seemed to pass in mere moments. I haven't been here since elementary school but everything looked exactly as I remembered. The waterfall would be a good ten miles from where I parked so, I got walking. I was hoping that I'd make it there before nightfall, it was still before noon so there was a chance.

As I walked, I didn't see any other signs of life. There were no other hikers even the birds were silent. It would have been peaceful if it weren't for the increasing weight in my bag. Each mile I walked it seemed to get heavier. My breaks kept happening more frequently the longer I walked. I've been sick and tired long enough so I forced myself to push through, I'd be lucky to make it to the waterfall before dark. With about two miles left, I could hear the falls in the distance. It was a constant rush of noise, one that haunted my dreams for months on end.

My clothes were soaked with sweat and my legs were absolutely killing me. I was never one to believe in magic or the supernatural. Hell, maybe this was just a coincidence but in my heart, I knew that my brother's death, my mom, my father's waning psyche. All of it had to be connected to the day he took the hand from its resting place.

When I finally arrived at the falls, the sun was fading fast. I gratefully dropped my bag to the earth and pulled out the hand and the photo my father had taken. I was certainly in the right place but, the falls were big. The waterfall itself was over a hundred feet tall and the pool that the water poured into was deep and stretched wide. When Dad came there must have been a drought because the water was much deeper than the photo showed. And a Hell of a lot colder than I could imagine. I placed the photo back in my bag and pulled out my flashlight. I didn't think I could let go of the hand If I wanted, even with only three fingers it was holding on tight enough to leave a bruise I was sure. I clicked the light on and aimlessly thought of where I should begin. I couldn't go diving, not only did I not have any equipment but the strong currents would pull me under and I didn't plan on joining the poor soul to whom I was connected.

I started by walking to the base of the falls, looking straight up at the white current as it pummeled against rock and misted the air. I was shivering soon enough. I looked up and down the rockface, searching for any sign of...I didn't know what. I did my best to think about where Dad would have found wherever the remains came from. I knew that there was more to this, why this curse was on my family. In the heart of this forest, all I could hear was the rush of water. I paused on the embankment that I was on staring at the pool in front of me. The bones tugged at my hand as they became heavy as lead. I barely took a breath as my body slammed into the

water. My muscles seized on me, I was never one for cold water, and with it being dark...I didn't know my eyes were closed until my hands crashed against slick rocks. The water stung my eyes as I opened them. My flashlight left my hand. I pushed against the earth and stood, the water came up to my chest after I was done flailing. The flashlight shined brightly at my feet, I took a deep breath and bent over, I opened my eyes once more and grabbed the light. I nearly sucked in water as I choked on my gasp. Even with the water blurring my vision, I knew exactly what I saw. Hidden away from the sky above, I saw the hand... and with it a vague illusion like it was reaching out for me. Hidden under the sediment, enveloped with roots, plants, and growing algae a skeleton of a young child was reaching out for help. Only now, years later did they finally grab hold. I pushed myself to the surface once more and walked to dry land. I sobbed and sobbed. And in pauses for breath, I could hear the birds and the crickets once more.

I spent the night in those woods, thinking of my family. I fell asleep as soon as I submerged myself in my sleeping bag. At first, I didn't know if I should leave the mystery of the child be. But having heard the rushing, sound of water in my nightmares in these last months. I thought they too should be free from that.

When I told the police that there was a body at the falls they were hesitant to react, but in time they were able to recover the body. The boy

was about thirteen and was declared missing twenty-five years ago. The injuries on the boy suggested he fell from the falls and broke his legs and a few ribs, he couldn't swim so he drowned. His name was Brian Overhill. His father went missing the same day, leaving Brian's mother without her husband and without her son. She would tell the cops that they went hiking and never came back.

I never saw my father again. Brian's mother wanted to meet me, the news wanted to interview me, and there were even talks of a documentary about the missing case. I would never be able to tell them the truth, that my dad brought home something dark with him and that it took three lives in return.

I've since sold the house and have been doing my best to take care of myself, but there are still some nights I still feel myself drowning. I don't think that'll ever leave me. But for now...I try my best to keep my head above the water.