

BEAR AND BISON FIND A HOME

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Splish, splash, splish, splash went the paddles rhythmically as Bear and Bison dipped them into the water in unison.

Splish, clunk, splosh, splash, spiddleclunk they went as yet again the two canoeists lost their stroke and tangled their paddles together.

“We’re getting quite expert at this, don’t you think?” said Bear, first from upstream and then from downstream, as the confused canoe rotated gently in a small whirlpool of its own making. “Who said that bisons can’t paddle?”

“You did,” said Bison.

Behind them – or was it in front of them (Bison could no longer tell) – the broadening V of their wake wrote a long message in some strange language in the water, and a ragged line of ducklings bobbed up, and then down, as each zig and zag of the ripples reached them. “Keep your distance there, number two; starboard a little number five; hold the line at the stern there number seven,” quacked the mother duck as she led them on their first swimming lesson. “The river’s a bit choppy today, I’m afraid. It must be those squalls coming in from the Atlantic. But just remember – ducks don’t drown!”

“Ducks don’t drown,” they all quacked in response, between beak-fulls of water.

Bison looked around and wondered how far they had come. They had been paddling since noon, but now the shadows were beginning to lengthen on the water. Their progress had certainly been rather slow: despite their best efforts the canoe seemed in no hurry and was content to explore every mud-bank, patch of reeds or tangle of roots it could find. And it had found a lot – some of them more than once. Even so, they must have travelled several kilometres by now, and none of the land on either side of them was any longer familiar.

Not that Bison felt especially anxious. After all, Bear had assured him that he was an expert mariner, and had told him long tales about his adventures on

the high seas. And no-one – not even Bear – could really get lost on a river. In the bottom of the canoe, wrapped in oilskin to keep them dry, they also had a tent and sleeping bags for camping at night, and enough supplies to last a week. (Bison, who spent a lot of time thinking about things, but thought more than anything about his tummy, had made sure of that.) Corncakes and donuts and maple syrup and cream, and some blueberry muffins, and some maple syrup, and a bag of trailmix and another of dried fruit, and a box of chocolate brownies – and some more maple syrup (just in case). They had even remembered to bring some matches to light a fire, and Bear’s favourite song-book (full of songs such as ‘Some bear over the rainbow’ and ‘Straw-bear bear’) so that they could sing around it at night. In fact, if Bison was honest with himself, he was quite looking forward to camping, and dinner. Particularly dinner. His tummy rumbled at the thought.

“I think we ought to stop soon,” he said. “Before it gets dark.”

“Oh, there’s no hurry,” said Bear. “The world is our winkle.” He thought for a moment – “Or do I mean lobster.”

“I think you mean oyster,” said Bison.

“No, lobster. I’m sure it’s lobster,” Bear insisted. “Anyway,” he continued, “there’s nowhere suitable to camp here. There’s bound to be a better place round the next bend.” And he dipped his paddle purposefully into the stream.

So they made their way erratically onward – going downstream on average, because that was the way the current had decided they should go, but still somehow managing to do so by this bank and that one, or by small circles and loops – to such an extent in one place that a young tree-frog who was watching them got so dizzy that he fell off his branch into the water and discovered for the first time that he was an amphibian.

“We could stop there,” Bison suggested, eyeing a shady glade by the stream.

“Too steep,” Bear said.

Bison’s tummy rumbled again.

“How about there?” he asked, looking at a flat gravel bank.

“Too stony.”

Bison’s tummy made another rumble.

“That looks nice,” he said, as a smooth, grassy glade came into view.

“Too many mosquitoes.”

Bison's tummy gave an enormous, grumbling growl.

"What was that?" cried Bear, turning round.

"What was what?" Bison asked trying to cover up his embarrassment.

Rumble-umble-umble said his tummy once more, even more loudly.

"That!" said Bear. "It sounds like thunder."

"Er – yes. I suppose it did," agreed Bison. And then, realising his opportunity – "I expect it was." He looked up at the sky as if to confirm the fact. His tummy added the necessary sound effects.

In an instant, Bear's whole manner changed. "A storm! We must find a port. Make for land. Hurry! Full steam ahead. Loosen the tops'l. Bear the mizzen mast. Splice the mainbrace. All paws on deck!" And he began to paddle furiously. As if in mutual panic, the canoe leapt forward.

"Land a-" Bison shouted as the river bank rushed towards them.

"Hoy-y-y" he continued, as he was caterpulted in a neat somersault (probably with double spin and pike, he thought, as water, sky and land spiralled past him) out of the canoe.

"Oomph," he added, as he landed on the surprisingly soft and spongy ground.

"Yrrark!" croaked a vaguely familiar voice from beneath him.

"Oh, hello Bear," he said. "Thanks for catching me."

"Yrrark!" said the voice again, as Bison tried to stand up and accidentally put a foot onto Bear's nose. "Yrrk, yrrh, yeerk, yah, yoh, yoofderdose."

"Sorry – what did you say?" asked Bison.

Bear pulled his nose back into place. "I said, would you please take your foot off my nose." But before Bison could apologise, Bear let out another squeal and jumped to his feet. "The canoe!" he exclaimed. "It's drifting away. Quick – catch it."

They both ran towards the bank and made despairing dives to catch the rope that hung from its bow. But just as they did so, the canoe twisted a little, and slid away, out from the bank into the stream. There, rather like a slightly guilty pony that has just unseated its rider at the first fence, it stopped and idled, trying not to look at them.

For some minutes, Bear and Bison stood at the streamside wondering what to do. They tried stretching for it, but even when Bison reached out as far as

he could, while Bear held his tail, they couldn't get near. The searched for a stick to try to hook over it and pull it back, but couldn't find one long enough. They tried throwing stones at it to sploosh it back to land, but that just had the opposite effect – for, as if convinced that it was no longer wanted and would only get a beating if it returned, the canoe rotated once more, slipped into the mainstream, and floated off round the bend.

“Marooned!” cried Bear. “We’re marooned!”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Bison comfortingly. “A little pink, perhaps – a bit flushed. But not ma-“ He caught Bear’s steely expression and fell silent.

Bear was silent too. Neither knew what to do. The enormity of their plight dawned even on Bison. They were up a creek not only without a paddle, but without a canoe as well. They were alone and lost in a strange and probably dangerous land. All their provisions had drifted away with the canoe. They had no tent, no sleeping bags – and no dinner!

As if the same awful truth had hit them both at the same time, they both began to shout. “Help! Help!”

“Shipwreck!” called Bear. “Bear overboard ... and Bison.”

“Food!” shouted Bison.

“Did someone mention food?” The voice came from across the stream.

“Er – yes. I did,” said Bison.

“Then I may be able to help,” said the voice. And a big tabby cat stepped into view.

“We’re stranded,” said Bear.

“We’ve lost our boat,” explained Bison.

“Actually, he lost it,” Bear insisted. “It was definitely still there when I got out And then he jumped on me,” he added. “That’s just the sort of thing bison’s do.”

“I jump on things, too,” said the cat. “I jump on mice and birds and snakes. I jump on bears as well – if they’re not too fierce.”

“I’m very fierce,” said Bear, raising himself to his full height.

“We would like some help,” Bison interrupted, seeing the way the conversation was likely to end. “We’ve lost our tent and sleeping bags.”

“We’ve nowhere to stay,” went on Bear.

“And nothing to eat,” added Bison, very sadly.

“Then you need rescuing” the cat announced. “And I’m just the one to rescue you.” She frowned briefly. “Though it’s a pity about the food...” She sat thinking, licking her paws for a moment. “Listen – this is what I’ll do. There’s a vine on this branch here. I’ll swing across on it and carry you back across the stream.” She saw their uncertainty. “Don’t worry. I like swinging. I sometimes go bunny jumping.”

“Don’t you mean bunjy jumping?” asked Bison.

“No, I mean Bunny Jumping,” she said firmly. “Now are you ready?”

“Yes,” called back Bear.

“I think so,” said Bison.

“Then I’m on my way.” The cat reached up and caught the vine. Then, after a few steps back, she ran and launched herself into the air.

“G O”
 E O
 R O
 O O
 N I M

she cried as she swooped across the stream.

“ing, This”
 jump- is
 bunny even
 than better

she sang as she swept back the other way.

“Catch pass”
 hold I
 of time
 my next
 paw the

she called as she flew above their heads again. Then, “Shplattt” she added.

“...”
 ...
 ...
 ...
 ...
 ...

said the vine silently as it swished over them, catless.

“Help!” cried a voice from above and behind them.

They turned and looked up. The cat was halfway up a tree, clinging onto the trunk with all four legs.

“Help!” she called again.

“Can’t you get down?” asked Bear. “I thought cat’s could climb trees.”

“I didn’t climb it,” she answered crossly. “It came out and grabbed me. That’s different.”

“Then you’ll have to jump,” ordered Bear.

Once more, Bison saw where things were leading and didn’t like it at all. “Bear will catch you,” he said brightly. “He’s good at catching things. Aren’t you Bear.”

“Er – yes,” agreed Bear, who always liked to be best at everything, but somehow felt that catching cats might not be one of the better things to be best at.

“Then I’m coming,” said the cat – and she let go of the tree, twisting gracefully as only a cat can, as she fell.

“Zrrrwwk!” said Bear, as she slipped through his outstretched arms and – claws full out like anchors to slow herself down – slid down his chest.

“You dropped me!” she said reproachfully as she picked herself up.

“You punctured me!” retorted Bear, feeling himself gingerly.

“Anyway, I’m here now. So everything is alright.” She looked at the two animals. “What are you doing here? And what are your names?”

“We were boating,” said Bison. “And my name is Bison.”

“How do you do,” purred the cat. Then she turned to Bear. “Boating – eh! So you must be the bison’s mate!” And she seemed to think that this was so funny that she rolled on the grass with laughter. Bison, too, allowed himself a tiny smile.

Bear just scowled. “I’m Bear,” he said. “Though some people call me Superbear.” He tried to ripple his muscles, but it looked more like a little shiver instead. “What’s your name?”

“I’m Badger,” said the cat.

“That’s a silly name for a cat.”

“Er – yes,” she said, a little deflated. “I think it was a case of mistaken

identity.”

They all shook paws, then stood, watching the stream slide past. Somewhere, amid the tree roots opposite there was a ‘ploop’ as a vole slid into the water for its evening swim. Mosquitoes skitted low on the surface, thinking themselves safe now that the sky was darkening – and one by one disappeared into the centre of a small, expanding circle of ripples. On the river bank, the daisies closed their eyes and prepared to sleep. Beyond, the trees scratched dark shapes against the reddening sky. An owl hooted.

Bison looked around nervously. “I say – we’re still marooned,” he said. “And we still don’t have any dinner.”

“But there’s nothing to worry about,” said Bear, a little caustically, “because Badger has come to save us.” He stared at her severely. “Haven’t you Badger?”

Badger looked a little discomfited, but only for a moment. “I’ve an idea,” she said. “One of us could swim across and fetch help.”

“Not me,” said Bison quickly. “Bison’s can’t swim.”

“Well, I certainly can’t,” said Badger. “We all know cat’s can’t swim.”

They turned to Bear.

“But bears can,” they said together.

Bear gave a small, dismissive shrug. “Some can,” he said. “And some can’t. I’m one of the can’t type. It’s evolutionary, you know.”

They were silent again in thought.

“If we had a pen and paper, we could write a message and put it in a bottle – if we had a bottle,” said Badger after a while.

Neither Bear nor Bison thought that this deserved a response.

“Or we could shout for help,” she suggested a little later.

“Oh yes – that worked well last time, didn’t it!” Bear replied testily.

After that, no-one seemed to have any more ideas, so they just stood there, watching the dusk settle, thinking of the long night ahead and the various dinners they would miss; listening with growing apprehension to the small noises in the forest behind them – and the dinners they might make.

“At least we needn’t fear the wild animals, said Bison, as much as anything to convince himself, ”with a fierce Superbear to protect us.”

At that moment there was a rustling behind them. Bear jumped. “What was that?” he squeaked.

The rustle came again, louder, and Bear scuttled behind Bison and Badger.

“I heard footsteps,” whispered Badger, and she crept behind Bison and Bear.

“I can hear breathing,” whispered Bison, and he scurried behind Badger and Bear.

In this way, with each growing rustle, footfall and sound of breath, and like some strange game of leapfrog, the three animals edged back towards the stream, until they stood, cowering, on the brink of the bank. In front of them, the bushes seemed to sway, and the noises reached a crescendo, as though a huge army of monsters was approaching.

“Get ready to dive,” squeaked Bear.

“We can’t swim, remember!” Bison croaked.

“I’m willing to learn,” said Bear.

And then the vegetation parted, and out leapt two huge, Irish wolfhounds, their breath like a cloud around them in the darkness.

“Oh, it’s you two,” said Badger calmly. “Have you come to take me home.”

“To be sure,” said the first wolfhound.

“Dinner’s ready now, begorra,” said the second.

“Can my friends come?” Badger asked. “They’re hungry and have nowhere to stay.”

“Now, is it that you’d be liking tripe?” they asked.

Bear and Bison both shook their heads vehemently. “Yuk,” said Bison. “Uurh!” said Bear.

“Ah then, to be sure they are welcome,” said the dogs. And with that they turned and trotted back the way they had come.

“Come on,” cried Badger, scurrying after them.

“Where are we going?” asked Bear, running to keep up.

“Home,” said Badger.

“But how will we get across the stream?” Bison panted.

“Over the bridge of course!” said Badger.

Bear and Bison stopped in astonishment. “You mean there was a bridge all along?”

“Of course,” shouted Badger over her shoulder.

“Why didn’t you tell us?”

“You never asked,” called the retreating cat. “Come on.”

Hurriedly they chased after Badger and the two dogs. And, just as she said, within a minute or two they had come to a bridge across the stream. And once across it they were taken to the three friends’ home. There they were introduced to Pippa and Larry, who lived in the Big House, and were served a delicious dinner, with second helpings of blueberry muffins and maple syrup. As they ate it hungrily, Badger whispered to them: “Breakfasts are even better – believe me.”

Afterwards, they were shown to a little wooden cabin amid the trees.

“Stay as long as you like,” said Badger.

“Ah to be sure,” chorused the two wolfhounds.

“I think I’d like to stay here for ever,” said Bear, looking around in wonderment at the cosy, cedar-wood room.

“So would I,” said Bison.

And so they did.