

Sleeping Bear

Once there was a bear, an ordinary black bear, who lived in a place that could only be described as wonderful, a wonderful place for a bear to live. Bear shared this abundant home with deer, rabbits, skunks, many other animals, and all kinds of birds. Bear spent most of his time wandering about the fields and woods in search of food. He ate a wide variety of foods; nuts, grubs, honey, and berries, all of which were needed to fatten him up for the long winter sleep. Of all these foods, berries were his favorite, berries of all kinds. He liked them even better than honey.

One day, during Bear's wanderings through a field, he came across a half-rotted log lying on the ground. In hopes of finding grubs, Bear flipped the log over with one swipe of his massive paw. With a loud squeak, a skunk rolled out of the log, which, unknown to Bear, was the skunk's home. The skunk continued his squeaking complaints. Bear, meaning to remedy the situation, moved the log back in place. But while doing so, Bear took the time to scoop up some tasty grubs before going on his way.

In that same field, a bit later on, Bear heard a loud squawk that came from behind a large tuft of grass where Bear was just about to place his big front paw. Pulling back his paw just in time, he saw a mother woodcock sitting in her nest with her eggs. She scolded him, told him to watch where he was going and to be more careful. Bear said he was sorry and then went on his way.

At the end of the meadow, where the woods began, Bear came upon a patch of blueberries. The bushes were very tall, taller than Bear. Bear shook the bushes. Berries from the top fell into his mouth, but many missed, falling to the ground. Two blue jays, not noticed by Bear, were in the bushes. Swooping down at Bear's head, they squawked their disapproval of Bear wasting so many berries. He said he was sorry but continued to eat the berries until he was stuffed and then went on his way.

Now with a full belly, Bear ambled along the edge of the meadow looking for a good place to nap, which he found in the shade of a large oak tree. It was noon, and dappled sunlight streaked through the leaves and danced across Bear's eyes, keeping him half-awake. As he lay there, two crows landed on a tree branch above him. Bear could not help but eaves-drop on their conversation. One crow was telling the other about a berry patch, a huge patch with lots of luscious berries. And best of all, the berry bushes were magical. As soon as a berry was picked, another berry grew instantly in its place. Many animals were feeding on the berries, but the berries grew back as fast as they were eaten. The first crow offered to show the other the way to the patch, and they flew off.

Bear came wide awake, got to his feet, and followed. He crossed the field at a dead run, bounded over a stone wall, splashed through a creek bed, ran over a rise and up a hill through a hemlock forest. It was all he could do to keep the crows in sight. Soon he was exhausted, about to quit, when the crows came to rest in a tree that overlooked a ravine. Reaching the crows, Bear found himself at the edge of a cliff, looking down at a huge berry patch.

What the crows said was true. As Bear watched the animals feeding at the berry canes, the moment after a berry was picked, another grew back in its place. Bear lumbered down the hill and began to feed on the berries, which he ate and ate until he became drowsy and laid down for a nap. When Bear awoke, he began to eat again, after which he fell asleep, after which he ate again, day after day, until one day he did not wake up at all. Instead, he had dreams of eating berries and rolled about, swinging his large paws, striking canes, sending berries flying into the air, some of which fell into his open mouth.

Days went by. Weeks went by. Bear ate and ate and grew larger and larger. Rolling about, he crushed berry canes, dug up the earth and roots with his claws. The patch was getting smaller. The other animals, growing concerned that the patch would be destroyed, held a council, at which they decided that they must wake the bear. Each animal, in turn, tried to wake the bear. The wolf howled in the bear's ear, but Bear did not wake up. The sparrows plucked the whiskers on the bear's face, but still sleeping, Bear swatted them away. The porcupine even stuck quills in the bear's feet, but the big bear did not seem to notice.

Each day, the berry patch got smaller and smaller. The other animals gave up trying to wake the bear and one by one went away, all except for the little nuthatch, who perched on an old stump and watched. As the days passed, the little bird gradually grew weak from hunger, but she stayed, watching until there was only one cane left with only one berry on it. Now, the massive bear, hungry and having fitful dreams, thrashed about, gashing the earth, knocking down trees, and crushing everything in his path. Bear's stomach growling, he rolled up close to the last berry cane, and with a swing of his giant paw, tore up the last cane by its roots, sending the last berry flying into the air. The berry fell downward toward Bear's wide-open mouth. The little nuthatch flew from the stump, swooped into Bear's mouth, caught the berry in his beak, and flew out between Bear's teeth just as Bear's large jaws snapped shut. With the last of her strength, the nuthatch flew back to the stump, where she dropped the berry. She laid down beside it to rest.

Bear rolled and thrashed about for several more days until his hunger finally woke him. He sat up, looked around at all the destruction. Bear saw the little nuthatch on the stump. He went to her and

asked her what had happened to the berry patch. The nuthatch explained that Bear had fallen asleep, that the other animals couldn't wake him, and that Bear had ruined the berry patch. Bear couldn't believe it and sat for a long time, looking about, feeling very ashamed.

After a time, noticing the nuthatch's weakened condition and seeing the one last berry lying beside the bird, Bear encouraged her to eat the berry so that she might recover.

Refusing, the nuthatch said, "I will die soon. Please do as I ask."

Bear nodded.

"Dig a hole in front of this stump. Lay the berry and my body in the hole and cover it with earth. Go to the top of the cliff and watch over this place forever."

A few moments later, the nuthatch died, and Bear did as he was asked.

Bear climbed to the top of the ravine and looked down on the devastation that had once been a bountiful berry patch. As Bear sat on the edge of the cliff, Bear thought about what he had done and began to cry. Tears ran down his face and dripped on the ground below, watering the earth around the stump. In time, the berry seed germinated, and a new cane sprouted up. Berries ripened on the cane and fell to the ground; more canes sprouted. The berry patch was growing back. The animals came again to feed.

If you should ever find your way to that magical berry patch, I'm sure you will find it much the same as I described. At the bottom of the ravine, the old stump is still there. And the animals are feeding on the berries.

While you are there, I hope you will spend some time waiting for the bear to appear.

Each afternoon, dark, puffy clouds gather above the cliff, taking the shape of a bear. The Bear Cloud pours down rain on the berry patch, continuing Bear's work, the healing of the berry patch.



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