



PLEASE DON'T FEED THE BEARS
by Judith Fraser

At last a few days away from the stress from the city.

"Watch out for Hanta virus," warned my husband the non-camper.

"Remember the forest belongs to the wild things that live there," chided my son who respects wild things.

"Be r-e-a-l-l-y careful of the Big Bad Wolf," chirped my five year old granddaughter.

"*Zippity-do-dah, zippity-ay.*" In a closed car, going 58 miles per hour up Route 5 away from Los Angeles, this 58 year old voice sounded pretty good.

Through the Grapevine and on to Bakersfield. No rush. No Worries.

At Giant Forest Lodge, a friendly woman handed me directions to my cabin. A sign, behind her, caught my eye, DO NOT FEED THE BEARS. "Who would want to feed a bear?" I said.

At 7 A.M., I awoke to the gentle sounds of birds. No lunches to pack, no meetings to plan.

I pulled on my sweat suit, brushed my teeth, put on sunscreen and mosquito repellent. With a water bottle in my backpack I was ready to experience the tranquility of the forest.

Morrow Rock a sign read. I stood tall, looked up the trail and accepted the invitation.

I reached down to pick up two walking sticks. Waving them over my head like a Warriress I called out to the ghost of my childhood. "I am Jane, you are Tarzan."

My brothers and I spent most of our spare time in the woods near our house imitating childhood heroes.

"We are marching to Pretoria, Pretoria, Pretoria."

The sky is a great audience. Swinging my sticks back and forth made me feel powerful.

As I walked on, the branches of a sequoia ahead of me began shaking. Its cones fell like hail on the forest floor. The barrage didn't make sense. It wasn't windy. I couldn't see anything. Yet, it shook violently. I put my walking sticks over my head and ran through.

The cones continued to fall behind me as I sat down on a fallen log. I had been walking more than two hours and felt hot and tired. It was about 9:30 a.m. I sat down. I opened my backpack and took out my water.

I noticed a bluebird, a meandering butterfly and some half-eaten red berries on a thorny bush nearby. I heard what sounded like the intrusive sound of a passing car in the distance and what I assumed were park rangers building something. About five minutes went by; I was thinking of taking a nap.

Suddenly a loud thump ripped away my serenity and catapulted me into life-threatening danger. A Black Bear dropped out of the tree I'd just passed and began walking towards me on all fours. I felt so dumb. No wonder the tree was shaking and the berries were half eaten!

My insides started screaming. But, my mouth wouldn't move. My body wanted to run. But, I couldn't outrun a Bear.

I thought I was having a heart attack. A bad childhood case of rheumatic fever had left me with an irregular heartbeat. "Nothing to worry about," my doctor said, "just leaky valves." Wrong! I definitely had something to worry about.

Terrified, I turned my back on the Bear and staggered in the direction where I thought I had heard the car.

My thoughts raced back and forth, up and down like a television screen out of focus. I knew everyone would be mad at me if I got eaten by a Bear.

I walked with fierce determination. Waved my sticks over my head. And sang.

“Whenever I feel afraid, I hold my head erect and whistle a happy tune. So no one will suspect I m afraid.”

Off the path, weaving in and out of obstacles, I sloshed into marshland. Frantically, I looked over my shoulder, hoping the bear was gone. Wrong! He was 20 feet away, slowly closing ground. Shock waves rolled through my body. My knees felt weak.

A fallen tree appeared out of nowhere to create a 40 foot bridge over the marsh. Could I balance on it? I'd been a dancer . . . 30 years ago. Could I cross and get beyond the marsh to where I was hoping against hope there was a road and people, and escape? I stepped up and prayed Mr. Bear would be too big for this small balance beam.

Knees shaking . . . I teetered across the tree . . . slipped and fell . . . scrambled back up and shakily went on. Bear's footfalls competed with my pounding heart. He was on the tree. Perfectly balanced. Fifteen feet away. Barnum and Bailey would have hired him in a flash.

African drums began to beat wildly inside my heart. I wondered why a search and rescue party didn't carry me out of this morning nightmare. Where was Tarzan of the jungle when I needed him?

Suddenly, I heard a deep booming voice inside my head. "Do you want to live?" It was jarring. I wondered if, indeed, I really had a choice. I reached the end of the log and jumped off.

YES, YES, YES. I turned around and angrily stared the Bear straight in the eye. I pounded my walking sticks over my head and shouted. "I will not miss my daughter's acting debut. I will not miss my son's cooking at his new restaurant. I will not miss my husband's new musical show. I will not miss my granddaughters next birthday. Now, **GO AWAY.**"

I turned, tore through undergrowth, bushes scratching, snagging my clothes. I went on as if the Bear were still behind me, climbed a small, 20 foot embankment and too numb to move, watched a car drive by. I looked back. I couldn't see the Bear, but I could feel him in the brush, his eyes still following me.

Frantically, I flagged down another car and scrambled into their metal womb ... grateful to be alive. The people in the car were tourists, a young European couple, driving around looking for Bears.