

Sex with Bears

By Michael Fine

© Michael Fine 2022

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

The hairless don't know. The hairless don't see. They are just shades. Ghosts. They stay in their world. We stay in ours.

Sometimes the hairless wander here. Then they are sucked back into their square cliffs and sleep, always sleep, eyes open, sitting as colors dance before them, freezing them in time and space.

We walk in and out when day goes. Live with trees, with rocks, in caves. Near the stream where it burbles down the hill, the hill so steep that the hairless never go there, not ever. Love the hill, the white trees and the red trees and the yellow trees. Smell everything, so rich and warm. Love the old log teeming with white grubs and worms, whole paw-full of nutbrown termites and red ants that crunch and taste like earth, like nuts, like mushrooms. Love mayapples in the spring, then cherries from high in trees when the days are finally warm and blueberries on those high bushes and blackberries when the light is longest and real apples in the fall. Love the deer parts the hairless leave behind in the fall, those entrails! Love the hurt deer to finish. Love to eat the fawns in spring when the does wander off into the sweetgrass. The walnuts, acorns, and chestnuts on the ground in the fall; the corn in the fields of the hairless so sweet; the dead coyote parts after the coyote pack rips one of its own to pieces after they howl at the moon. Or shot by the hairless. Or poisoned.

Love it all. The honey in the honey-trees. Eat everything and it is all good. Love the steamy trout and crayfish, their grubby cool slippery taste and smell. Love the cold wind coming. Awake! Awake! Awake! Eating everything now, night into day and all day long deep in the woods and outside, with *them* in tow. *Them* alive and rooting about with, learning to grub, to snuffle, to grunt and to hoot. *They* play. We play in the woods. *Them* and *them* before and their *them*, our rich big circle.

We meet in the woods and play by moonlight in the summer, so many of us, so rich with life and love. Big circle. Then as the nights bring that glorious cool, we fan out, go grubbing, smell and taste and eat and will soon sleep and soon dream glorious dreams of love and grubs and trout and of the pollens which make us drunk in the summer and of rolling in the grass together when the days are warm and the moon is out, our dreams alone but still together. Many and one together. E. Pluribus Unum.

Cathi Westrick-Abrams was a kind and tolerant person, and she had done the work, she thought, until she saw the bear scat in the wood. Her work: the antiracist self-extinction of white privilege. The centering. The openness to the spirits of all things, of all people, of all beings. She marched against wars and for Black Lives Matter, put up the sign on her front lawn: Hate is not welcome here. She responded to the crowd-sourced emails for Syrian refugees' relief and for the victims of the Haitian earthquake. She lived in a sanctuary city and was ready to defund the police, more or less, at least as a slogan if not as a fact, and she sang at night in coffeehouses and in churches all around New England, a little off key but with great feeling, her guitar playing adequate to support her voice but nothing special. Finger picking was just not her thing.

When she sang, Cathi sang only in fragrance-free venues. Cathi was not allergic herself, but she stood in solidarity with all the people who suffer from allergies to fragrances and other toxins; in solidarity, when you got right down to it, with all who suffer, all humans, all beings, and all spirits in their past current and future lives. She taught reiki and yoga at the local community center and worked as a school psychologist in Central Falls, testing the kids of immigrants and working people, documented and undocumented, to try to help everyone reach

their full potential. She was vaccinated and always masked inside, but she had compassion for the anti-vaxxers both on the left and on the right, though she still couldn't see what all the fuss was about.

The scat lay in the middle of the new walking road Tom had put in just a few weeks before. They had twenty-four acres of woods and lived thirty-five minutes from Providence. Talk about a blessing. Their land was rocky and up-and-down. It had been sheep pasture once, the paddocks marked by stone walls, the stones lifted by hand from the stony earth which gave birth to them only after tremendous resistance, a terrible labor -- and hand carried to the wall, placed by hand and chinked in place by hand. Cathi knew those hands were black and brown hands, the New England slaves from Africa and enslaved Narragansett, Pawcatuck, Nipmuc, Pequot, and Mohegan people who history quickly forgot, although the walls they built remained.

Their land, hers and Tom's, which they borrowed, more than owned, was wild and free. It was left to be lungs for the city places, to be balance, a place of restorative justice. They had a little garden, of course: tomatoes and squash, which the woodchucks and deer ate, asparagus in the springtime, strawberries soon, some years pickling cucumbers and rhubarb, beans and peas and brussels sprouts. And they composted, as everyone should. Their garden grew, when it grew, it was in spite of their land and not because of it. There was sunlight, true, but Cathi and Tom worked hard to make a little patch of fertile soil, trucking in compost and making it themselves, adding layer on layer of old leaves and grass clippings to the organic garbage and then letting it cook over a summer before adding it into the soil for next year's growth.

The scat was right in the middle of the walking road. Not back in the woods.

Now that's a big dog, Cathi thought when she saw the scat on one of her morning walks before work. But it didn't look like it came from any dog Cathi knew or knew about. It was bigger than anything a person made, as wide as a man's hand and as long as a zucchini, crumpled, fibrous, tan and green, not tightly formed and not like a mound of brown raisins, like a deer's scat. Way bigger than the large ones Cathi always figured came from a big buck, who were never seen nor heard but left tracks in the mud and deer-sign where the deer crushed the grass when they bedded down for the night. There were seeds inside this scat, which Cathi could see where it was broken apart in places. Too big for a raccoon, a bobcat or a fisher cat. Big. Whatever made it was big. Which didn't make sense. There were no big mammals in this part of New England. Moose up north maybe. Cathi had no idea what moose scat looked like. People claimed to have seen mountain lion and bear from time to time, maybe. But usually nothing confirmed. Nothing that big lives here, not for three hundred miles north, Cathi thought. Maybe it was a bear, passing through in the night. Still a little weird that it would have left a sign so close to the house, and right in the middle of the walking road. Like someone or something was trying to mark a territory.

She took a picture and looked it up on her cell. Definitely bear. She called the Fish and Game people, expecting that they'd make a fuss. They listened but didn't get excited. There are plenty of bear around, they said. We don't talk about it much because we don't want people to be frightened. Or to start driving around, looking for bears, clogging the country roads. The bears have been here for years, the Fish and Game woman said. But they keep to themselves. Raid garbage cans

occasionally, that's about it. They are more afraid of people than people are afraid of them. Wary is a better word.

Black bears are two to three hundred pounds and not always brown, the Fish and Game woman said. Sometimes brown or honey colored. Sometimes red, like cinnamon. The big males get bigger, three, three and a half feet at the shoulder. But they don't stick around much. They wander over territories of a hundred miles or more. It's the females, the sows, who hang around. There's probably a whole village of them, living in the woods with their cubs. But they won't bother you if you don't bother them. Keep your garbage locked up. And your pets. Call back if you see them in daylight. Rabies in bears is incredibly rare. But it happens. And you know the drill. Don't feed the bears. Please please don't feed them. Don't even think about it. A fed bear is a dead bear.

A whole village of them with their cubs, hiding in the woods, Cathi thought. Invisible. Living in her woods. A rich life unknown. A whole culture in the woods, living wild and free, alongside of but hidden from hers. There all along, living beside her. It seemed impossible. Present but unavailable to her. A secret life. A village unseen. Ignored. Disempowered. Disrespected.

Who speaks for the bears?

But now what had been invisible had made itself known. One scat. Who knew what existed? Who knew what was possible?

Dark. Warm. Cold, Fetid. Rotting logs. Grunts, coughs, snorts, rumbles.

Guttural. Of the gutter. The rot. The humus. The soil. Love of the gutter, the rot,

the humus, the fermenting humus, fetid, past present and future together, the center. All together.

Of the gutter. Be the gutter. Snuffle in the dark earth. It rots and percolates and comes together. We luxuriate in it and grow from there. What we return to and come from. Lust. Lust for this moldering black earth. What can't stop wanting, wanting hot, wanting to percolate, wanting to grunt in the pleasure of being.

Cathi read all about bears on her phone.

Bears are omnivores. They eat roots, berries, fish, grubs, insects, grass. Roadkill. Acorns. Nuts. Bears graze on grass like cows. They eat meat if and when they can get it. People imagine epic battles: the grizzly brings down a moose or even a bison, dropping onto its back from a low hanging branch, or rushing the beast at dusk while it grazes in a meadow, after it strayed too close to the deep woods, the bear mauling the moose or bison with its claws, ripping out its windpipe. But the truth is nothing like that. Bears *can* run almost as fast as those hoofed beasts for short stretches, that much is true, but they aren't really hunters like the big cats. A bear will find a wounded deer, or a fawn that is sleeping while its mother feeds or finds a carcass of a buck wounded in battle over a doe or shot by a hunter, and then nature takes its course. Scavengers, not hunters. Big scavengers. They eat anything and everything, and delight in tasting what they find. Delight in feeling full and sleeping. Invisible. They fear nothing and have nothing to fear.

Don't feed the bears. That seemed wrong. The bear or bears were out in the woods, and no one knew they were there. The bear or bears were hungry. No one was attending to their needs.

Cathi could not stop thinking about that scat and the bear that made it. Him. Or her. Or whatever. That scat in the path, calling to her. The bear or bears, shadowing Cathi's life. She imagined a, what, a pack? Or gaggle? Or cluster of bears? in the woods, rolling on their backs in the sun, scratching themselves against the trees. A bear, a hundred yards from home. From her house. Her house and Tom's place. Or bears. Walking through the moonlight in the moon-shadows of *their* house and barn and the big trees around their house.

Do bears think? *What* do bears think? Do they dream? Do they love? All creatures are created equal. Cathi wanted so much to speak for the bears. Lusted after speaking for the bears.

She wanted to see them. To know them. To be with them. To be one with them.

But how?

Call them in first. Lead them to trust her. Develop relationships. Long and trusted relationships. That's how you start.

Deer-corn might work. It comes in fifty-pound bags. Hunters set deer-corn out next to a salt lick and just below a deer stand, so the deer will come to feed and then the hunters can blow them to kingdom come in the fall, when the season starts. The whole kahuna recorded for prosperity by a game camera. Second

amendment! Guns don't kill people, people kill people! What America has become.

There is technology, of course. You can buy a deer-corn feeder, which dispenses the corn gradually, so only deer can get to it, and so it lasts long enough to get the deer dependent on the corn, so they keep coming back for more. You can buy a game camera, so you can sit in the comfort of your house and watch the citizens of the woods walking in and out of the forest, watch them living their secret forest lives, the deer coming to eat the corn. You can record their movements so you can plan, so you know when to be there, in the woods, up on the deer stand, waiting.

Cathi bought the corn. And set it out every day, a pound or two at a time. On a little rise just a few yards from where the scat was, after the scat had been melted by a hard rain. No deer-corn feeder though. And no game camera for her. And of course no gun. She wanted to be there, be *present*, on the ground with the bear. Or bears. And see and feel them for herself, right close-up and personal. Hate has no home here.

Eat anything. Everything. Play. Love. Mate. Mate again when it rumbles through. The hairless stumble about. Still blind in their square rocks.

Alive in the moonlight. Asleep in the day. Preparing for the big sleep, the big dreams.

There are stories of people who have lived with wolves. But no stories about who live with sloths of bears, which is what a group of bears is called – a sloth. There are many stories of trained bears who are forced to live with people -- tired, mangy, tortured beasts, caught as cubs, from mothers who were shot or hit by cars, trucks and trains, and many stories about trained bears in Europe who live with traveling people or in circuses, who live with their people in poverty and sadness and must beg for their supper, who sometimes can be made to dance or ride tricycles or even bicycles or drive cars or old pickup trucks in a circle in a circus ring, the ringmaster cracking a whip, the bears defeated. We show our superiority, how we can subdue the most powerful beasts, how we conquer our fear and contain our nightmares. Man's inhumanity to bears. We think we rule, think that the wheel of nature will not turn and turn on us, we believe that nature now ignores a vacuum, and that the pendulum will not swing back. Why is that? Who do we think we are? Do we think at all? Feel anything that matters?

The corn lay scattered on the ground for a few days. Birds flitted around. Then blackbirds came, cawing as the sun set, their black wings flapping, a strange vision of death and destruction. The bears. Cathi only wanted the bears. But all she saw was deer-sign. Hoofprints in the mud, flat on one end, pointed on the other, two semi-circles coming together. Cloven hooves. Humps of small pellets where they poop. Chew their cud. Corn gone.

She was not about feeding deer.

This hairless comes into the woods. Red coat. Orange vest like hunter. Corn on the ground. Stand in the tree like a hunter. But not hunting. Different smell. Pollens, not smoke or motor-oil. Spring and summer, not fall and winter. New hairless. Unknown.

Perhaps good to eat? Don't eat the hairless. Sometimes a body in the woods, hanging from a rope. Not eat even that. Still hairless. See but not be seen. Hear but not be heard. Feel but not be felt. Smell but not be smelt. Puny. But avoid. Know *that* the same way that knowing the need to eat everything in the fall and not rest until the snow comes. The way to know how and when to sleep.

Cathi sat stood in the deer-stand mornings all that fall before work and evenings after she came home until it became too dark and cold for her to see. At first, she thought the bear or bears had moved on, that the scat was from a foraging visit, as she learned that adult bears range over territories of hundreds of square miles.

But as she came into the woods more, she saw other hints that she took to be bear sign. Scratches on a tree trunk that might have come from a bear's claws as the bear was sharpening those claws. Or climbing a tree. Dug out places by a stream bank, where the stream came under a stone wall. Rotten logs turned over and split open.

Cathi was no expert, of course, but she felt, and she believed that there were bears in these woods. She just couldn't see them. She couldn't smell them. She didn't hear them. But she knew they were there. A he bear? A she bear? Or

cubs? One? Two or ten? She thought one. A he bear, as big as a bull. But that was in her imagination, and perhaps all of it was in her imagination after all.

She brought out table scraps and left them on the forest road, near where she'd seen the first scat and under the deer blind. She tried apples: the deer ate them. She tried oats. The deer and rabbits ate those. Maybe a bear that came around when she put that food out ate some, but if that bear was there, it left no sign.

Time to give up, she thought. This is silly. There is no bear.

Then she hit on fish heads. There was a fish counter at the local supermarket. When she asked, they said they throw their fish heads away. There's a cat lady who sometimes comes for them, but the cat lady was more than a little confused, so she forgot more than she came by. If Cathi came by once a day, every day, they would give her all the fish heads she could use. Ten pounds of fish-heads, wrapped in newsprint, in a plastic grocery bag. Calling all bears!

The fish heads smelled to high heaven. The smell stuck to her car and got on her hands. It stuck to her clothes and hair and made Cathi want to take a shower, though she wasn't sure three or four showers would wash the smell away.

Then it was November. Most of the leaves were gone from the trees. The oak leaves here brown and a few were still attached. They waved in the wind, one or two to a branch, like lone soldiers doing sentry duty, walking back and forth in the dawn and dusk, and some of the white birches still had leaves, now yellow in

the empty dark woods. The neighbors will complain about the stink, Cathi thought, even though the nearest neighbor was a quarter mile away.

She climbed the deer-stand. It was dusk. There would be a freeze that night, but she was dressed for the weather.

The hairless was up a tree. Good eats under. Hungry now. Cool air at night. Too much. Let go. There were house cats slinking in bushes. Take one of those. Let go scat. Then move off.

Hairless go away.

Always go away. Sucked back into the big square rock. Other eats for now.

Cathi heard the mewling and scratching of the house cats all night long. She came down from the deer-stand after dawn, chilled to her core. This was crazy. An obsession. There was no bear. It was all in her imagination.

But there, between the deer-stand and the house, was another scat. Almost as wide as a man's hand. Long as a zucchini. And still steaming.

She smelled something strong and clean, sweet and musky, like fresh-cut hay that had gone a little moldy.

There *was* a bear.

And the bear was nearby.

Hairless comes back with more eats. Went into tree. Watch hairless in tree. Eat when hairless sleeps. Then go away. Watch hairless come down. And then do a little dance where the eats were, as if there is moonlight.

I didn't see the bear. Or bears. I would fall asleep in the tree-stand, wrapped in a down quilt, wearing a hat and gloves and breathing little clouds into the cold November night. There was white-gray frost on the brown leaves. In the morning the fish-heads would be gone, and it or he or she would be gone as well but they often left a scat behind for me, to mark the place, to tell me they had been there and gone.

Until one night when the moon was almost full. And then the light kept me awake.

The bear was a shadow at first, silver-gray in the moonlight and graceful as he or she walked out of the woods, as it -- he or she -- came out from between the rocks next to the woods road where the road climbs a little hill, near a stone wall through woods that used to be pastures, the stone wall built by slaves, the pastures now a hundred years overgrown. Walked on all fours, his or her head nodding from side to side, snuffling as she or he came on, picturing the world as smells and grunts, pictures that grew into which what she or he could see in the moonlight with added definition.

When the bear was almost under my tree, she or he sat back on their haunches and looked at me. Our eyes met. I didn't move. Then the bear stood

again on all fours and came to eat the fish-heads I'd brought, shuffling a little as she or he came on, coughing, snuffling, and quietly grunting, more like a man who had just entered a woman and was starting to thrust than a creature who was angry or afraid. The bear turned its face to the fish-heads, grabbing four or five at once with its teeth and raising its head to swallow. When the bear turned around, I saw she was she. She didn't look at me. She looked under me, but I was sure she knew I was there. Then she sat, leaned over and shoveled the remaining fish-heads with her forepaws, slurping and snuffling again, with an occasional grunt of pleasure, which I took to mean she knew me and felt safe with me there, standing ten feet above her, listening and looking as she ate.

Then she was gone.

And I was alone. And the sky became blue and then red in the east as the sun came up, a red band of glorious light spreading across one horizon.

And then it was every single night for a week. She was like a new lover. I couldn't wait to be with her, and then to be with her again, again and again until all our passion was spent. All my passion, perhaps. Her passion was for fish-heads, not necessarily for me.

Her ardor was unrelenting. Nothing stopped her. She came on, ate everything in sight and then moved off. Winter was coming. She was getting ready.

One night two cubs came out of the woods with her. I couldn't believe my luck. They sat off to the side near the wood's road. It was still early. The moon had not yet risen so I could barely see them. The woods had no shadows of moonlight yet. They just sat watching. Then my she-bear raised her nose, grunted, and the

cubs came to be with her. They stood next to her, sucking down the fish-heads with their dam. My bear was chunky now, a thick layer of bear-fat rising under her skin, her blanket and nourishment for the long sleep, the dreams humans call hibernation, but isn't really. It is the time of most beauty, of dream, of life unrelenting, of colors and smells and desires but without pain. My bear had filled out and round after a fall of eating.

She ate with her cubs, but more slowly than usual, and I swear I thought she was showing them off to me, the way a woman in her sixties shows off the pictures of her new grandchild in a distant city. She was taking me to meet her family. She loved me and trusted me. Our intimacy had deepened.

Then I knew what I must do next.

I went to three grocery stores the next day and to the fishmongers on Lonsdale Avenue in Pawtucket, the fishmonger to the Spanish and the poor. Thirty pounds of fish-heads! The golden fleece! The holy grail!

That night I placed ten pounds of fish in the usual place. But I put the other twenty pounds in a black plastic leaf bag (Holds 30 gallons! Strong and tear resistant! Won't split or spill!), tied it with a rope, threw the rope over the bar of the deer-stand, and hauled it ten feet in the air, so it was in the tree with me and would be high off the ground when the bears came back.

It was late November. There was frost now most every night but there had been no hard freeze yet and the air was crisp and clear. A northeaster had come up the coast a few days before, ripping most of the remaining leaves off the trees. The

first big snow was still a few weeks off, which meant we still had a few weeks together, but I knew that snow was coming, and that I'd lose my bears to the winter, to their dens and to their deep sleep. The moon was three-quarters full now, a waning gibbous moon that rose at ten and set with the dawn. Except for that first night with the cubs, the bears came most every night well after midnight when the moon was brightest. They had lost their fear of me, their caution. They ate, and then rolled on their backs and growled softly with contentment after they ate and before they shuffled off into woods to eat more, somewhere else, again.

I smelled them before I saw them. That clean smell which put me at ease, like hay or oats or fresh cut grass, the smell of grazing beasts, not the smell of carrion or rotting flesh, sweet and surprising because I'd always thought of bears as gross beasts who would smell of mud, musk and sweat, like men who worked with their hands and didn't shower.

They ate.

And I climbed down.

Love is not a thing of the body. Love is a thing of the soul. Not a thing of the self. Of the souls, which is part of the soul of the universe, of everything and everyone. When you put yourself aside. Like dreaming. When you are completely present. And completely absent at once. When there is only now. And you are with your beloved and the whole universe, both at the same time and part of all of it. You don't sleep then. Can't sleep. You only dream. When you *become* the colors and the lights, the smells and the hopes and the desires, without any fear, for a moment. When you are free of the body at last. In the body and

free of it. Connected, so connected. And free at the same time. When you know who speaks for the bears.

All three looked at me, sideways looks, swinging their heads to see me and then swinging their heads away, back to the fish-heads, as if looking out of a corner of their eyes, as if they were shy. Goldilocks, for that instant. Who's been eating my porridge? Whose been sitting in my chair? Who's been sleeping in my bed? I knew not to get between the sow and her cubs. But I was among them, just standing, my back against the tree at first.

The fish-heads were gone. The bears were sated. The cubs began to wrestle, rolling over and over on their backs in the moonlight.

I knew they were about to leave, to shrink back in the forest, off to hunt the next item in the endless meal of bears in the month or two before sleep. But I couldn't allow that. I couldn't stand the thought of their leaving, to eat and then to sleep and dream without me, the thought of separation, of their absence.

So I acted.

I stepped toward them, to where the rope holding the plastic bag over our heads was tied to the tree. I had something that would bind them to me, at least for another few hours.

Fish-heads from the sky! Fish-heads everlasting! The hairless is fish and the fish are the hairless. Where there is one there is another. We ran around in the moonlight, sniffing them out. They were on the ground, in the brush, on the rocks and the roots. Glorious glorious fish.

It isn't possible to know what happened next.

It's possible Cathi tried to hug a bear.

It's possible the bear saw Cathi as one of its own and tried to hug her.

It's possible Cathi tried to hug a cub and the mama bear was offended and stood her ground.

It's possible Cathi broke and ran.

And the bears chased her, or not. Or ran with her, playing. Or not.

It was a cold night. Humans don't undress in the cold, so at least we don't have to imagine Cathi undressing to be with the bears in whatever way beings can be together. Perhaps.

I know this: human beings have lost our purpose. We appear not to need one another anymore. Not to see ourselves as part of a bigger picture, as part of a nation, of history, of hope or even of one family. We've swallowed a line about the importance of the self and the need to attend to our inner being, whatever that is, as if we created ourselves, feed ourselves, taught ourselves, protect ourselves, and have meaning in of ourselves. We forget that we are nothing without one another.

In the U.S. we spend \$100 billion a year on pets. In a nation that has three million people homeless. We have game cameras and automated deer feeders but no decent public transportation and lousy schools, in a nation that has enslaved two generations of young people to student debt, because we make our young people

pay for their own educations, instead of educating them. We spend \$57 billion on video games, in a nation that has overwhelming beauty in its mountains, prairies, woodland and coast. We spend \$6 billion a year on pornography. The only good news is that we spend more on pets than on videogames and more on videogames than on pornography. Is that what good news has become?

There are Americans who are well fed, housed, and comfortable, who spend all their waking hours thinking about guns, or hunting.

And people like Cathi.

What a confused and disordered lot we have become, so capable, so lucky to be alive at this time in human history when everything that we might want is available to us.

And so lost, meandering through the woods at night, without direction or purpose. Not knowing how good we can be, and how good we can make the world after all, if we were just able to put aside our delusions and distractions.

All of Michael Fine's stories and books are available on MichaelFineMD.com or by clicking [here](#). Register there and we'll send you a new free story every month.